Building Thriving Academic Communities: Implementing Coaching and Mental Wellbeing Tools for Students, Educators and Staff

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Abstract

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health has taken centre stage in socio-political agendas [1], research in the field has increased significantly and its impact in higher education has become evident [2,3]. This has probed building mental wellbeing amongst academic students and faculty members, enhanced support services and implemented digital tools that can monitor and support mental health and wellbeing [4,5,6]. University educators and staff are faced with increasing students' mental health challenges [7], often without a formal preparation to successfully manage complex situations. Literature highlights how the acquisition of coaching techniques can have a positive effect on mental wellbeing and resilience [5,8,9]. The connection between mental wellbeing and a sense of belonging to the academic community is another key element that is gaining scientific consensus [10]. This research project explores how the use of online learning spaces for students, faculty and staff to access coaching and mental wellbeing tools can play a key role in supporting thriving academic communities.

Keywords: *Mental wellbeing, Coaching, Academic community, Online resources*

1. Research context

As an aftermath to the Covid-19 pandemic mental health moved to the forefront of policy makers worldwide. In the last World Health Organisation (WHO) Mental Health Report, it was stated that mental health was a global "growing crisis" [1] and more substantial research was urgently needed to face the expanding needs recorded in various sectors of the population.

The WHO Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030, updated in 2021, highlights the global shared effort to better understand and face a growing need for knowledge, clinical support and preventative measures to face what was a growing global concern [11].

In recent years mental health in higher education has gone from being an under-researched area to a blooming area of research unveiling new data and scientifically grounded guidelines. Higher education has become a focal point for many studies addressing pilot students' mental health support programs [12, 13], innovative training programmes [6] as well as experimental teaching approaches [14] to support the mental wellbeing of academic communities, using tools from the area of psychology [15] and coaching [16, 8]. With the vast majority of university courses moving abruptly online as a consequence of lockdown, the questions of how this may impact students' mental health probed new research questions and uncovered the urgent need for mental health support [2].

While extensive research has been conducted on how to support students' mental health, there is a noticeable lack of data when focusing on the mental well-being of lecturers and academic staff [5, 17]. However, existing scientific literature emphasises the vital role that lecturers play in promoting the mental well-being of the university community [18].

In the current post-pandemic landscape faculty members are more commonly confronted with issues concerning the psychological aspects of their students, lacking the formal training needed to completely grasp and handle sensitive support requests [19]. In the light of this, a central role is played by Faculty Development, which equips lecturers with the necessary strategies and tools to combat stress, prevent burnout, and foster a healthy work-life balance [20]. Additionally, Faculty Development facilitates the cultivation of positive relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, and a sense of purpose in their role as lecturers [4, 5].

The quest to find the tools to harness mental wellbeing in Higher Education communities is well underway, opening a vast and exciting landscape for researchers to explore and define.

1.2 Definitions

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her potential, is able to cope with stressful life events and work productively and fruitfully, making a contribution to his or her community" [21]. Furthermore mental health is seen as an "integral part of our general health and well-being and as a basic human right". These definitions emphasise the essential role of mental health and how it includes emotional, psychological, and social aspects, as well as the complex interplay between biological, environmental, and socio-cultural factors. It goes beyond the mere absence of mental illness and includes positive qualities such as resilience, or the capability to handle daily stressors and navigate one's environment effectively [10], emotional intelligence (EI), and the ability to effectively deal with life's challenges. As a result, mental health significantly influences our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, shaping our interactions with the world around us. While at the same time being influenced by our genetic makeup, life experiences, relationships, and societal norms [1].

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify, understand, and regulate one's own emotions, as well as the capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond effectively to the emotions expressed by others [22]. It involves a set of skills and competencies that enable individuals to navigate social interactions, foster relationships, and make informed decisions based on emotional awareness. The cultivation of emotional intelligence can result in enhanced communication, stronger interpersonal connections, improved decision-making, and an overall sense of wellbeing in both personal and professional domains [23].

Coaching is described as a partnership between clients and coaches that involves a creative and dynamic process aimed at fostering accountability, growth and positive change, empowering individuals or groups to unlock their full personal and professional potential. It involves supporting the development of the individual by assisting them in setting achievable goals, cultivating self-awareness, exploring possibilities and overcoming obstacles that will allow them to reach their objectives. Coaching emphasises self-discovery, reflection, and action taking, empowering clients to clarify their aspirations, develop strategies, and take proactive steps toward desired outcomes [24]. From being predominantly prevalent in the corporate setting [16], coaching is now being integrated into university programs [9] as research shows the positive impact on increasing resilience, confidence and EI, fostering stress and task management and providing emotional support [25, 26, 8].

2. Academic Community Wellbeing

Promoting mental health in higher education settings mostly involves the creation of structural frameworks or discrete individual interventions that target different areas, such as resilience, counselling, stress reduction, suicide prevention [10, 27].

The WHO Mental Health Report states that having good mental health means we are better able to connect, function, cope and thrive in our daily lives. It also highlights how protective factors play a crucial role in enhancing resilience at various stages of our lives. These factors encapsulate our personal social and emotional abilities, positive social engagements, access to quality education, satisfactory employment opportunities, secure neighbourhoods, and strong community unity, among other aspects [1]. By fostering these protective factors, individuals are better equipped to withstand and overcome adversities they may encounter throughout their lives. In this context, the role of building thriving academic communities comes into focus.

Literature demonstrates that a sense of belonging to the campus community is a significant predictor of students' overall well-being, psychological health and social support in various countries such as the United States [28, 29], Canada [30], Australia [31], and Japan [32].
University educators and staff are faced with increasing students' mental health challenges [2, 3, 7], to address this issue, attention has been placed into adopting a comprehensive approach to mental health within universities that caters to individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The involvement of students in the research and design process, is a distinctive element of the Nurture-U national, large-scale UK research project that explores innovative methods of supporting student wellbeing by actively involving a Student Advisory Group [33].

The Nurture-U project was developed in October 2021 from the University of Exeter, in collaboration with the Universities of Cardiff, King's College London, Newcastle, Oxford, and Southampton and is expected to be finalised by July 2025. This research project encompasses five distinct workstreams, namely a biannual wellbeing survey, the implementation of an online Wellbeing Toolkit, the creation and assessment of a mental health literacy course, the Compassionate Campus project, and three research trials focusing on various interventions.

The Nurture-U project builds on the concept of "Whole University Approach" created in alignment with the Okanagan Charter: An International Charter for Health Promoting University and College [34] and the #Stepchange framework [35] established by Universities UK, an organisation that represents the executive leadership of universities and provides guidance for their decision-making strategies. The whole university approach emphasises the significance of cultivating a strong organisational culture that fosters health, wellbeing, sustainability, and community connectedness in the working, learning, and living environments. In order to be successful, a whole university approach must evaluate current initiatives and devise strategies to utilise and unite successful practices. It involves the whole university population, with attention dedicated to sub-groups' needs and connects different aspects of the university such as curriculum, environment and services. The key elements that characterise the whole university approach are: a supportive culture and environment; the integration and connection of diverse healthcare services; and the key focus on health and well-being of the entire population [36].

The need for an integrated approach to wellbeing and mental health support in Canadian academia is addressed by DiPlacito-DeRango [37] who emphasises the importance of enhancing training and awareness activities for students, educators and staff. Identifying the overarching goal in embedding student mental health into the core operations of higher education, spanning from the classroom, institutional practices, and national-level considerations.

Another case study is evident at Simon Fraser University, where researchers have customised a framework initially formulated for the corporate sector (Guarding Minds @ Work) to assess the stress factors and resources available to college students [38]. By employing this framework, nearly 700 students were surveyed, investigating areas requiring improvement. The primary area identified as needing enhanced support was the maintenance of a healthy balance between student academic commitments and personal life, as evidenced by challenges related to workload management and stress. Another key aspect was the extent to which students perceived themselves as integral members of a supportive campus community.

Within the United States, the role of academic community well-being plays a pivotal role in the structural framework of the American College Health Association's "Healthy Campus 2020". This evidence-based framework offers a comprehensive range of tools and resources to effectively address the diverse health needs of post-secondary students [39]. The framework identifies five key characteristics of a healthy campus, emphasising the promotion of both physical and mental well-being. It acknowledges that health outcomes are influenced by a multitude of factors at different levels, such as public policy, community, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal aspects [10].

Specifically, through an examination of 83 prevention programs aimed at post-secondary students, it was determined that interventions focusing on skills development with supervised practice yielded the highest effectiveness. Additionally, mindfulness interventions and cognitive behavioural interventions were identified as having the most significant impact on mental health outcomes [40].

3. University Mental Wellbeing Online Resources

In today's digitised social landscape, the significance for universities to provide online learning as well as support platforms has become increasingly crucial. The utilisation of digital technologies within educational institutions enables the establishment of virtual learning environments accessible to students, professors, and university personnel.
These environments serve as inclusive platforms where users can leverage a multitude of tools to nurture self-awareness and bolster mental well-being. By transcending physical boundaries, digital technologies play a pivotal role in fostering the growth of more positive and resilient academic communities [41].

The number of online resources and services designed to measure and support the wellbeing of university students is increasing in recent years. An example of such developments is the online positive education programme Flourish-HE tailored to enhance the mental health and overall wellbeing of university students in the UK [42]. By adopting a holistic approach and incorporating self-directed exercises and activities, the 8-weeks programme aimed at fostering the emotional, psychological, social, and physical aspects of students' wellbeing.

Online tools have been developed and enhanced in recent years such as the UK MePlusMe service [13] which assesses mood and skill development.

The Finnish UniHow platform [14] was designed to heighten consciousness regarding teaching and learning practices, with a specific emphasis on the effects of teaching methodologies on student well-being.

A pilot study recorded positive impact in fostering wellbeing, lowering stress levels and supporting mindful attention in higher education students based in Australia and the UK, via an online asynchronous brief mindfulness-based intervention [43] over the course of one semester.

4. Methodology of an Italian Research Project

The growing scientific evidence on the positive impact of online mental wellbeing interventions builds the foundation for this research conducted in a public online Italian university setting. The research seeks to provide a pedagogical input to higher education mental wellbeing strategies through synchronous online training and asynchronous evidence-based resources for students, lecturers and university staff. It identifies the creation and implementation of an online training programme, focusing on strategies related to psychology [15] and coaching [16, 8], as a potential means of acquiring strategies to improve stress management and increase resilience and wellbeing. This online course anticipates the involvement of the entire university population, emphasising the importance of prioritising the mental health of all individuals to promote a thriving academic community.

Three research domains are investigated: pedagogical, developing a customised synchronous online training program based on the levels of wellbeing recorded through the administration of a validated questionnaire; educational, designing materials derived from scholarly sources for individual asynchronous use; and scientific, evaluating the effects of the training program on participants' mental wellbeing, recognizing constraints and potential future applications.

The guiding research questions are:
1. What "whole university approach" training programmes exist internationally on mental wellbeing in academia?
2. What is the current status regarding the perceived needs at IUL Telematic University (IUL)?
3. Which coaching and mental wellbeing tools demonstrate the most significant influence within the higher education setting?
4. What level of impact does an impromptu online training intervention have on the mental wellbeing of individuals at IUL?

The primary goal of this research is to develop six 90 minutes long ad-hoc synchronous online training interventions that are designed to support mental wellbeing through the utilisation of coaching-related tools and psychologically informed techniques. Additionally, the study aims to compile asynchronous literature-based materials for participants to access, as well as seeks to measure the impact of the training intervention on the mental wellbeing of the participants. Each intervention will be interactive and focused on a technique, addressing the theoretical background and practical application. The tools and strategies will be based on scientific evidence that has been uncovered in the literature review based predominantly on international studies conducted within the last five years. The expected results are an increase in resilience, a fortification of self-knowledge and sense of mental wellbeing.

The following methodologies are intended to be used: a literature review, the use of the validated Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) [44] - designed for mental health promotion initiatives, less affected by social desirability bias, conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups to conduct a case study [45].

The examination of existing literature is conducted by utilising the research platforms Scopus, Web of Science, ResearchGate and Google Scholar. The primary focus is on analysing articles that have been published within the past five years, written in both Italian and English languages. These articles are identified by employing the keywords "mental wellbeing, online training, coaching, academic community".

The prevailing methodology of the project is that of action-research [45], where the IUL Telematic University will serve as the setting for a case study, where participants will engage in synchronous interactive lessons through the university platform. Informed consent will be requested from the participants and a mixed-methods data collection will be carried out for the impact analysis of the project [45]. The levels of mental wellbeing will be evaluated before and after the intervention by utilising the validated and translated WEMWBS [44]. The WEMWBS is a self-assessment instrument designed to assess psychological wellbeing understood as positive mental health. It therefore only takes into account positive aspects of mental health related to affective, cognitive and elements of good psychological functioning and self-realisation.

It presents a positive formulation of all 14 items, 12 items in the Italian version, without being characterised by social desirability bias. The Italian validation showed that the WEMWBS is reliable for persons between 18 and 80 years of age, thus lending itself to the whole university approach intervention type of the present research. The WEMWBS will be presented before and after the training intervention in order to measure any changes in the well-being levels of the participants.

Based on the initial data, a tailored synchronous training intervention will be developed and delivered through an online platform, incorporating coaching principles and mental wellbeing tools. Throughout the duration of the experiment, the participants' experiences will be documented through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observation to gather more intricate and comprehensive qualitative data. To assess the effectiveness and impact of the intervention, any significant changes between the responses provided before and after the intervention will be recorded.

Subsequent research steps will involve obtaining informed consent from research participants, conducting the WEMWS to assess the university population's needs and developing a tailored training intervention based on the WEMWS's findings and the IUL ethics committee guidelines.

5. Conclusions

In view of the current literature, which highlights the urgency of identifying impactful mental wellbeing tools, guidelines and resources, the objective of this investigation is to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and methodologies in the field of wellbeing in university education by exploring pedagogical tools grounded in up-to-date scientific studies to bolster and champion mental health in higher education

Based on the analysis of the data generated from this experiment, bearing in mind the limitations linked to translating specific case study results into a wider research field, there could arise an opportunity to delve into the implementation of a similar online educational intervention in other Italian academic settings. This extensive study would endeavour to contribute to the establishment of pedagogical guidelines to effectively support mentally thriving academic communities in Italy.

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