Flourish-HE

Examples of Practice, The Student Mental Health Evidence Hub

The Student Mental Health Project is an Office for Students (OfS) funded project that aims to help higher education providers develop their student mental health interventions. The project has developed a Student Mental Health Evidence Hub, a free resource consisting of an evidence-based toolkit, evaluation guidance, examples of practice and the results of our sector engagement and student panel work. The project was led by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) as part of a consortium with What Works Wellbeing, SMaRteN, Student Minds and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.

This document contains an example of practice to support student mental health in higher education. This is one of a number of examples which have been collated as a result of calls to the sector issued by TASO. Please note that the information contained in these examples is not endorsed by TASO, and TASO has not been involved at any stage of intervention development, delivery or evaluation. We are grateful to the participating higher education providers for sharing information to facilitate the development of these examples.

Contents

Overview

Higher Education Provider:	University of Worcester
Intervention Title:	Flourish-HE
Intervention Type:	Active Psychoeducation
Target Group:	All students, universal
Date:	October 2023

For more information on the Flourish-HE project, please contact Dr Blaire Morgan, b.morgan@worc.ac.uk

With additional thanks to Luqmaan Waqar from King's College London for developing this example of practice.

Brief overview of the intervention

The University of Worcester provides an eight week online programme, offering a holistic approach to supporting its university students' emotional, psychological, social and physical wellbeing. Titled 'Flourish-HE', the programme draws on the 'PERMA-H' model which describes six key pillars to wellbeing: Positive emotion, Engagement, positive Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment and physical Health (Seligman, 2011).

The Flourish-HE programme consists of eight weekly one-hour wellbeing sessions. The sessions employ a 'positive education' approach which seeks to promote skills for wellbeing alongside traditional academic skills. Research in the field of positive education has consistently demonstrated how promoting wellbeing in educational contexts can support enjoyment and engagement in learning. The primary aim of the intervention is to enhance the six facets of wellbeing described by the PERMA-H model.

Intervention approach

Each of the eight Flourish-HE sessions is designed to promote one or more of the six PERMA-H pillars of wellbeing. The sessions contain background information on key wellbeing constructs (i.e., theories, frameworks or principles) and interactive activities to promote wellbeing and social interaction with course mates. All information, resources and activities included in these sessions are underpinned by theoretical and empirical evidence, with a particular emphasis on content from positive psychology such as Flourishing and the Mental Health Continuum, Broaden and Build Theory, Find, Remind and Bind theory, and Attitudes of Mindfulness (Fredrickson, 2001; Keyes, 2002; Lai et al., 2018; Seligman, 2011).

The programme was first piloted with a small number of students in April-May 2020 (during the first Covid-19 lockdown in the UK) and was later repeated on a larger scale in February-March 2021. In 2021, attendance at programme sessions ranged from 30 to 74 students. Attendance was exclusively online.

By employing a positive education approach, the project aims to enhance student learning, through encouraging course engagement and connectedness. Furthermore, as a breadth of research indicates that developing emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing can promote mental health and alleviate symptoms of mental ill health, another aim of the Flourish-HE programme is to prevent the development of mental ill health symptoms and to alleviate pressure on central university services by mitigating referrals to counselling services.

While Flourish-HE was delivered and evaluated with undergraduate and postgraduate students studying either Psychology or Criminology courses at the University of Worcester, it is broadly applicable for all students studying in Higher Education.

Intervention evaluation

The mixed method evaluation included a comparison across pre- and post-programme surveys completed by 33 students alongside 9 qualitative interviews. Participants in the evaluation included undergraduate and postgraduate students across Criminology and Psychology courses with a mix of home and international students, identifying as men, women and non-binary students.

A mixed method evaluation of the Flourish-HE programme was conducted to examine the degree to which the programme was able to:
- a) enhance the six facets of wellbeing described by the PERMA-H model;
- b) enhance student learning (indicated by work engagement and sense of community); and
- c) alleviate symptoms of mental ill health that have been associated with university study (i.e., anxiety, depression and academic burnout).

An explanatory sequential mixed method design was employed, with quantitative pre/post surveys to establish differences in facets of wellbeing, mental health and academic outcomes and qualitative semi-structured interviews to further understand the facilitators and barriers of the programme.

The Flourish-HE evaluation has demonstrated the need for a multi-faceted wellbeing programme within higher education, with students being receptive to the opportunity to develop and discuss wellbeing. Findings across the quantitative and qualitative methods demonstrated that Flourish-HE supported the development of PERMA-H wellbeing pillars, helped to alleviate symptoms of mental ill health and allowed students to feel more connected to their course and peers. Specifically, pre/post quantitative differences were observed in the development of positive emotion, relationships, meaning, sense of community and the alleviation of depressive symptoms.

Qualitative findings further indicated how the programme was able to support student engagement during times of academic pressure and provide an antidote to negative emotions, such as stress, loneliness and hopelessness. The role of Flourish-HE in enhancing social connectedness was a prominent theme in the qualitative data and indicates the important role that wellbeing programmes can play in enhancing a sense of connection and belonging at university.

The full evaluation can be accessed here (Morgan, Simmons and Ayles, 2023).

Next steps

The qualitative findings further indicated some considerations for future development of the programme. This included supporting students to maintain increases in wellbeing in the longer-term, for example, through continuing practice and commitment to self-care and providing opportunities for students to tailor wellbeing practices to their needs and preferences. The researchers also recognised that the timing and duration of changes to wellbeing as a result of the programme were hard to identify and this may be key to fully understanding the impact that interventions, such as Flourish-HE, have on students in higher

education. Future evaluations of Flourish-HE will aim to investigate when and where changes in wellbeing are experienced across the programme, for example using diary or life history methods that prompt the consideration of wellbeing before, during and after participation in Flourish-HE.

The delivery of Flourish-HE across other higher education courses and universities (with appropriate adaptation) is currently under discussion with various possible routes to widening wellbeing provision. Flourish-HE has, to date, run as an online-only programme, primarily in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but also to promote a sense of safety and 'benign disinhibition' in students. Within the mixed method evaluation, a small number of requests for in-person content were raised. Therefore, more recent iterations of Flourish-HE have responded to this request by combining elements of online and in-person delivery, for example including on-campus mindfulness and savouring sessions to further enhance the programme. To support the future enhancement of the programme, the Flourish-HE team will work proactively with students to incorporate student voice into HE wellbeing provision. Finally, subsequent evaluations of Flourish-HE may seek to examine the programme's impact on the retention and attendance of students across their studies.

References

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