# UDL and the Social/Emotional Aspects of Learning: Embedding Mental Wellbeing is Everyone's Business.

Rachel Davies

Kevin Merry

Zoë Allman

**De Montfort University,** zallman@dmu.ac.uk

## Abstract.

The emotional aspects of learning are important but sometimes neglected elements of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This paper discusses a multi-faceted project to embed mental wellbeing at De Montfort University, Leicester, a UK university with an established UDL policy. The project encompassed the development of teacher training to consider student variability in emotional responses to learning; the provision of tutor resources to support the embedding of learning about wellbeing within the curriculum; and approaches to sharing practice across the campus. This paper argues that academic staff are key players in the support of students' mental wellbeing and that a whole organisation approach, rather than a narrow focus on the provision of mental health support services, is an effective route to improving students' mental wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Embedding; Mental wellbeing; Universal design for learning.

# 1.    Introduction.

De Montfort University (DMU) has almost 29,000 registered students, primarily at its Leicester campus but also studying at UK-based and transnational education providers. The University was particularly impacted by the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic, as Leicester was the first UK city to be placed in local lockdown. Leicester, and the university, experienced more stringent and longer lasting restrictions than the rest of England.

Previously, in early March 2020, as the UK entered the first national COVID-19 lockdown, DMU was about to launch a university-wide approach to embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum as part of a national project led by Advance HE.  DMU has seen a continual rise in the number of students with a declared disability in recent years, with 19% of the student population declaring a disability, and 6% of DMU students declaring a mental health condition (2021-22, Institutional Data), so supporting mental wellbeing is a key issue.

DMU is proud to be a large and diverse institution with a deep tradition of widening participation among underrepresented groups. For example, 48% of students come from Black, Asian and other ethnically minoritised groups (2021-22, Institutional Data), and there are approximately 3,000 international students representing 130 nations. Subsequently, the student community in terms of demographic profile is an entirely heterogenous one. This heterogeneity, when considered in the light of persistent health inequalities within the UK (Williams et al, 2022), results in the university placing a high priority on the wellbeing of students. The university embraces a whole organisation approach to support student health and wellbeing (Hughes & Spanner, 2019).  The Healthy DMU philosophy recognises mental wellbeing is relevant to all, it is an approach that seeks to reduce wellbeing barriers to facilitate student success, establish pro-active approaches to mental wellbeing, and an environment that is health promoting. This philosophy is informed by a social model of wellbeing, in which a student's experience of mental wellbeing is directly related to their environment and experiences, based on the five ways to wellbeing (Aked, Marks, Cordon & Thompson, 2008). The approach encompasses a philosophy that places care and concern for wellbeing as central facets of learning and teaching (Noddings, 2018), as well as acknowledging that belonging, connectedness and wellbeing impact markedly on the development of the "*whole student*" and their success (Van der Meer et al., 2022).

Aligned with the University's approach to empower and engage stakeholders, at the start of the project there was extensive stakeholder engagement across the University, ensuring a project-led approach responding to the needs of students and staff. With the introduction of the lockdown and the instant move to online delivery for taught activity, meetings and development opportunities, the planned approach required swift reconsideration to ensure fitness for purpose. This was not just to respond to what had been previously identified, but also in response to the unprecedented pandemic situation where mental wellbeing had

become a much higher priority, not just within the University, but nationally.

Instigating a re-scoping activity, the University aimed to develop an approach that would support what needed to be done to embed mental wellbeing, and what could be achieved, during a pandemic. The pandemic necessitated the use of online delivery, therefore the existing online hubs, Healthy DMU and the Healthy DMU Staff Toolkit, that supported health and wellbeing, were ideal platforms for development to host more resources about mental wellbeing (Parkin and Brown, 2020). The re-scoping activity led to five core strands of activity that would underpin DMU's approach to embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum, including: 1) expansion of the University's student-facing online hub that supports health and wellbeing, Healthy DMU; 2) the development of new tutor resources to support academics in effectively embedding mental wellbeing, available via the Healthy DMU Staff Toolkit; 3) enhancing the staff development offer to include professional boundaries and supporting students with mental health matters; 4) expanding the academic teacher training offer to include a greater focus on embedding mental wellbeing; and 5) sharing best practice. Success measurements included University-wide engagement with the new tutor resources and an expanded academic teacher training offer, alongside the activity occurring through the sharing of best practice. This paper focuses on aspects developed through core strands 2, 4 and 5, summarising a range of interlinked and interdependent activities and interventions to support and enhance the student experience, and discusses why embedding mental wellbeing is everyone's business – not only the concern of mental health and counselling services.

## 2.   Universal Design for Learning (UDL) at DMU.

The level of student diversity at DMU means that it cannot be assumed that each individual student will approach and engage with learning in a consistent way. Subsequently, there can be no '*one size fits all*' approach to learning, teaching and assessment where such student diversity exists. In 2015 the institution took the decision to adopt Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as its principal approach to learning, teaching and assessment.

UDL is an approach that allows learning to be accessible for students possessing a wide variety of learning needs and preferences (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Burgstahler & Cory, 2010). The variety in the way in which students approach and engage with learning is known as student variability. Typically, sources of variability interact with the learning environment, creating  barriers to learning. For example, being a learner with dyslexia is not a barrier to

learning. The requirement to read a large quantity of text and then respond to it in writing quickly could be a barrier to a dyslexic learner. As such, barriers are environmental. Using a UDL approach options are offered in relation to learning and teaching approaches, learning resources, and how students demonstrate learning, as a means of removing barriers to learning.

The following sections highlight the core strands of the project.

## 2.1 Core strand 4: Expanding the academic teacher training offer to include a greater focus on embedding mental wellbeing.

The emotional aspects of learning are less frequently explored elements of UDL, but these are inherent particularly in the provision of multiple means of engagement, and in their impact on executive functioning (CAST, 2018). Using UDL as a frame for embedding mental wellbeing makes clear the rationale for why lecturers, teachers and learning designers are integral to students' wellbeing.

Learning is a social and emotional activity, significantly influencing cognitive factors central to learning, including perception, attention, memory, reasoning, and problem solving (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Tyng et al., 2017). From a social and emotional perspective, students will vary in relation to how they respond to given learning situations. As such, social and emotional learning is a source of learner variability. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the learning environment will naturally elicit emotional responses from students (Mortiboys, 2013). Some of those responses will be positive, whereas some will be negative. Negative emotional responses are essentially barriers to learning. Subsequently, a learning environment that consistently elicits negative emotional responses may prevent some learners from learning effectively, as well as potentially impacting upon their wellbeing.

When considering the emotional dimension of the learning environments you create, it is helpful to use the Meyer et al. (2014) approach to intentional learning design which consists of: 1) Outcomes; 2) Assessments; 3) Methods; 4) Materials. Each of these four areas could arouse particular emotional responses in learners, and so from an emotional perspective, it is useful to assess each area for sources of reward, punishment and stress. Arguably, as each part of intentional learning design can be a source of reward, punishment or stress, learning and teaching methods are probably the largest and most influential area when thinking about the emotional dimension of learning. For example, if we're thinking about how learners might

experience regular rewards when they learn, or if we're reflecting on potential sources of punishment or stress, then it's likely that the teaching methods will be the major source of these.

At DMU, as part of activity supporting colleagues with their instructional design considerations when creating new or refreshing existing modules, the intentional learning design approach was used. Specifically, colleagues were encouraged to examine their outcomes, assessments, materials and particularly methods for sources of reward, punishment and stress. Where sources of punishment and stress were found, colleagues were encouraged to remove those sources, or identify potential alternative approaches as a means of removing potential emotional barriers. The emotional dimension of learning and the implications it has on wellbeing are also central features in the design of the University's new Postgraduate Certificate in Empowering Education (PGCEE), an in-house teacher training qualification for academic staff, recognising the impact and influence academic staff have on the experience of students.

## 2.2 Core strand 2: Development of new tutor resources to support academics in effectively embedding mental wellbeing.

Applying a UDL lens when considering the emotional aspects of wellbeing is an important way for teaching staff to embed mental wellbeing, however this project also developed resources to equip academic colleagues to do more than that. A range of downloadable resources were developed for teaching staff to use in small group teaching and tutorials, to support learning about wellbeing topics such as homesickness and settling in; working in groups; managing time and workload; and maintaining motivation. Recognising the key role that academic staff have in supporting and enhancing the mental wellbeing of students through their everyday activity, the materials were reviewed by DMU's teaching fellow community and then hosted on the Healthy DMU Staff Toolkit, an online repository of resources designed to support staff in signposting and managing student welfare issues.  The success of these resources was measured through the numbers of staff downloads, see below.

This "*teach it yourself*" approach was also used to extend existing on-course wellbeing workshop provision called Course Specific Initiatives (CSI) (Davies, 2020) to a much wider range of courses by developing bespoke activities and resources for course teams to deliver themselves. This approach culminated in 2023-24 with every undergraduate module at levels 4 & 5 in the Business & Law faculty having wellbeing activities delivered within academic

modules by academic staff. Key to the success of this approach is integration with the resources on the Healthy DMU Hub, an online repository for students that provides wellbeing information and signposting.

## 2.3 Core strand 5: Sharing best practice.

This project built on existing good practice in the university and a key aspect of our work was extending that and making resources and information available to as wide a range of staff and students as possible. This was achieved through expanding the use of existing tools such as the student facing Healthy DMU Hub and the staff facing Healthy DMU Staff Toolkit, already widely used by academic staff in the support of students. Best practice was also shared through utilising existing communication channels such as internal marketing and communications, to highlight examples of embedding mental wellbeing in practice across the university, and with the Student Union, and through recruiting Deans and Associate Deans to raise awareness amongst the teaching community. The University's regular email newsletters to staff provided a platform to cascade information about the support available to colleagues wanting to explore mental wellbeing within their curriculum, including details of the new tutor resources available and the emphasis on mental wellbeing in the teacher training offer.

## 2.4 Success measures.

The activity outlined under '*Core strand 4*' led to the number of academic staff engaging in UDL training increasing significantly in a two year period, from 135 (2019-20) to 576 (2021-22).  In addition, those participating in the in-house teacher training qualification over the same period increased from 28 to 240.

'*Core strand 2*' led to the number of courses engaging with CSI increasing from 35 in 2019-20 to 52 courses in 2022-23, representing a significant increase in the number of academics aware of and utilising the university-wide resources available to support student experience. 164 downloads of tutor resources took place, demonstrating early engagement in the new materials that allowed academics to use these as appropriate in their teaching.  Staff attendance at welfare training workshops increased from 300 (2020-21) to 627 (2022-23), demonstrating heightened awareness and interest in the topics.  Access of the online Healthy DMU Hub increased from 75,996 page views (1 September 2020 – 1 September 2021) to 98,555 (September 1, 2021 - September 30, 2022), directly enabling students to explore ways

to support their personal wellbeing and development.

Under '*Core strand 5*', work to share best practice has extended beyond the life of the project. For example, many case studies included in Embedding Mental Wellbeing (QAA, n.d.) are drawn from practice at DMU, examples identified through sharing best practice within the University. The authors also presented key approaches from the project at the 2023 AHEAD Unity Conference in Dublin. Best practice has also been shared through written outputs, including a chapter Jamil and Morley's (2022) '*Agile Learning Environments amid Disruption'*.

The 2023 National Student Survey (NSS) introduced a question inviting reflections on how well the university communicates information about mental wellbeing support services, and 76.4% of DMU respondents responded favourably, highlighting the positive impact that the range of activity to address mental wellbeing is having on the student experience.

## 2.5 Reflections on sharing best practice with the sector.

At the RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) annual conference in September 2022 the authors asked workshop participants, mainly from the UK, to explain how they embedded mental wellbeing within their institutions. "*RAISE is a worldwide network of staff and students in Higher Education who work or have an interest in the research and promotion of student engagement*" (RAISE, 2024). There was a wide range of responses ranging from "*Talk during induction*" to "*Wellbeing retreats during fresher's week, wellbeing projects which focus on supporting the health of BAME students, plans to embed a wellbeing module across all courses*".  So, practice across the sector in the UK varies enormously. The authors also asked workshop participants about who, other than specialist mental health teams, was involved in supporting wellbeing in their institutions. Again, the answers were varied but Students Unions, personal tutors and student support teams were frequently mentioned. Academic staff were not mentioned, outside of their tutorial role. This paper argues that supporting mental wellbeing needs to be a whole organisation approach, and that academic staff are well positioned to both remove emotional barriers to learning and contribute to teaching students about wellbeing strategies, but that they need to be supported in this through professional development, wider institutional policies, and the provision of resources.

When attending AHEAD's 2023 Unity conference the authors were struck by the potential of a national UDL strategy to embed support for student mental wellbeing across higher and

further education. Taking a whole organisation approach to student wellbeing and considering the social and emotional aspects of learning are key activities to achieve the aim of removing barriers to participation in learning and encourages engagement of students in learning, whatever their current state of mental health.

# 3.    Conclusion.

Responding to the impact of the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic and in recognition of the continual rise in the number of students declaring a disability, and the diverse nature of the student population, DMU developed a unique project to embed mental wellbeing in the curriculum.  Stakeholder engagement prior to the national and local lockdowns enforced by COVID-19 provided critical underpinning to the re-scoping activity that would lead to a project that *'could be achieved'* during a pandemic.

Focusing on three core aspects of the project, this paper summarises DMU's approach to developing new tutor resources to support academic staff to effectively embed mental wellbeing, how the academic teacher training offer was expanded to include a greater focus on embedding mental wellbeing, and how best practice was shared through the project.

 A fundamental underpinning of UDL prior to this activity set the scene for new opportunities to explore emotional aspects of learning, and to ensure wellbeing was modelled in the design of new in-house teacher training.  A suite of new tutor resources for academic staff responding to emerging wellbeing needs enabled academic colleagues to deliver critical wellbeing support in a timely manner, appropriate to the delivery of academic curriculum content.  Recognising the project was building on a range of good practice, existing communication methods and fora were utilised to share updates and highlight examples that could be adapted for use in other disciplinary areas.  Reflections on sharing best practice with the sector identified the value of a whole organisation approach to student wellbeing, based on UDL principles.

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