

LEARNING & TEACHING PAPER #20

Needs and wellbeing of
students and staff

Thematic Peer Group Report

Chair: Gerald Prescott,
University of St Andrews, United Kingdom

Coordinators: Pieta Sikström and Helene Peterbauer

March 2023



DIGIHE

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



This report is published within the framework of the EUA-led [DIGI-HE project](#). To find out more about the project, visit the webpage.

DIGI-HE is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Commission. The European Commission's support to produce this material does not constitute an endorsement of the content, which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



This publication is licensed under the Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial](#) CC BY-NC

This information may be freely used, copied and adapted for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source is acknowledged (European University Association).

European University Association asbl

Avenue de l'Yser 24

Rue du Rhône 114

1040 Brussels

Case postale 3174

Belgium

1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland

+32 (0) 2 230 55 44

+41 22 552 02 96

www.eua.eu · info@eua.eu

Introduction

Higher education student and staff wellbeing has recently received increased attention, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when widespread lockdowns forced all members of these institutions to conduct most, if not all, their activities from home. The ensuing emergency remote teaching highlighted many benefits of digitally enhanced learning and teaching, but also spotlighted existing and new wellbeing challenges.

Given these developments, the EUA Learning & Teaching Thematic Peer Group “Needs and wellbeing of students and staff” (hereafter “the group”, see Annex 3) was invited to discuss how institutions can be more attentive to addressing and supporting their student and staff wellbeing. This group comprised peers from eight higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area. Throughout 2022, they met online to explore the factors that constrain student and staff wellbeing and exchange insights on ways to enhance this through continuing education and support services.

This report summarises the group’s findings. It starts out by listing the aspects of a higher education institution’s activities that the group identified as having most influence on individual wellbeing. Then it presents the results of student and staff surveys at group member institutions to enquire about these aspects, and whether they were positively or negatively affected by digital learning and teaching. The report continues with the outcomes of a group member institutions’ student focus group, designed to obtain further insights into student views of wellbeing and the support institutions can provide. It concludes by outlining challenges, key considerations and recommendations, which institutions may find helpful for ensuring targeted and effective support for their students and staff.

Before delving in, however, a few crucial methodological and terminological considerations which underpinned the group’s work are outlined below:

DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING WELL

The definition of wellbeing most closely aligned with the group’s understanding of this concept is: “the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced”,¹ with both resources and challenges including psychological, social and physical factors. The group further understood wellbeing as a personal experience, which is situational and multi-dimensional. Wellbeing is not merely the absence of sickness, it also means having sufficient resources, meaningful relationships, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Wellbeing in higher education affects individual students, academic and support staff, their interactions, and the institution. It is also a strategic concern, both in terms of institutions’ internal development (for example with regard to human resources) as well as their contribution to social development in their local region. The group distinguished between individual and institutional wellbeing, defining the latter as determined by the former’s collective wellbeing.

Wellbeing includes several dimensions, including the physical, psychological, social, emotional and cultural. The group addressed all of these dimensions, as shown in more detail below.

THE IMPACT OF DIGITALISATION

The group began by enquiring which aspects of working and studying at a higher education institution influenced individual wellbeing. The particular impact of digitally enhanced learning and teaching was addressed in a second step, which is explored in more detail in Section 3: “Data collection”. The group’s work and findings are nevertheless not to be interpreted as an attempt to determine whether digital educational methods² have a generally negative or positive effect on wellbeing. Their aim was to provide insights into the complex multitude of factors that higher education institutions may wish to consider when trying to support student and staff wellbeing.

Key aspects of wellbeing

The group started by creatively identifying a wide range of factors that influence individual wellbeing in a mind-mapping exercise via Miro. It then substantiated how these factors materialise in a higher education study or work environment. Table 1 divides these factors into three overarching categories: 1) Community and culture; 2) Policies and practices; and 3) Institutional attributes.

Table 1: Key aspects of wellbeing

COMMUNITY AND CULTURE	POLICIES AND PRACTICES	INSTITUTIONAL ATTRIBUTES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological safety (i.e., the conviction that expressing one's views will not result in punishment or humiliation) and a safe learning/working environment • A sense of institutional connection and belonging • A sense of a fair and sustainable environment • Inclusivity and accessibility • Recognising individuals and their opinions • Mutual respect between all members of an institution • Good studying/working relationships and social connections • A shared culture • A shared vision • Connection between governance and people • Good communication with colleagues and managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-life balance • Management of workloads • Recognition and reward • Flexibility in learning/studying/working arrangements • Support systems and services (e.g., for physical and mental health and wellbeing, or financial and legal advice) • Contracts and secure working arrangements • Co-creation and collaboration • High-quality facilities and resources • Sustainable management and interaction practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A culture of understanding and empathy • A culture of respect and tolerance • Fairness in decisions and actions • Transparency in decision-making • Empowerment (i.e., freedom to have a voice) • Encouraging learning from mistakes • Diversity and multi-culturalism • Supporting individual agency • Innovative and embracing of new experiences

This list is by no means exhaustive, and several aspects may easily be assigned to more than one category. However, these results provided a good basis for discussing wellbeing in practice, and for subsequent data collection.

Data collection

STUDENT AND STAFF SURVEYS

Next, the group (including the co-coordinator from the University of Jyväskylä) invited students and staff members from their institutions (i.e. at nine higher education institutions in eight countries), to complete an online survey. This survey asked respondents to select the five aspects in each overarching category with the biggest impact on their wellbeing. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether each of their top five aspects had been negatively, positively, or not at all affected by digitalised education. The respondents were also able to propose additional factors affecting wellbeing not listed in the survey.

The group received 88 student responses (85 individual and 3 group responses representing the combined views of student cohorts) and 264 university staff responses (260 individual responses, and 4 group responses) from the group member institutions. The results are not sufficiently representative of a sector as large and diverse as European higher education. However, the group believes they provide appropriate stimulus for the ongoing debate on how to best combine tried-and-tested pre-pandemic methods with new digital practices in the best way for students and staff.

As students and staff received almost identical questionnaires, the results from the two groups can be compared.³

Table 2 shows the aspects reported to have the greatest impact on wellbeing, ranked according to the proportion of responses identifying them as having the greatest impact, and how they are perceived to have been influenced by the rapid transition to online approaches during the pandemic.

Students and staff generally named the same aspects of “Community and culture” as having the biggest impact on their wellbeing. Their answers also generally match under “Policies and practices”, with the two exceptions of “Contracts and secure working arrangements” which had no equivalent option in the student survey (and is therefore absent from the students’ responses) and “Support systems and services”. Students ranked support systems and services highly (14%), and a substantial number of their responses reported that these were negatively affected by digitalisation, however this was not in the top 5 aspects selected by staff (only 5.75%). This difference could be due to staff perceiving support services as a token measure, or the fact that many staff members might seek support outside the university when needed. The top four answers from students and staff were identical under “Institutional attributes”. Interestingly, “Encouraging learning from mistakes” was ranked fifth by students, whereas staff placed “Empowerment” in fifth place.

Table 2: Top five aspects with greatest impact on wellbeing, and the impact of digitalisation on these aspects.

*(% shows the proportion of responses identifying this as the factor with the greatest impact on wellbeing)

**(% shows the proportion of responses from staff or students indicating the impact on wellbeing: negative, positive, or not at all)

Category	Respondents	Aspects identified as having the greatest impact on wellbeing*	Affected by digital or hybrid education (most selected response)**
Community and culture	Students	1) Psychological safety (15.77%)	Not at all (43.90%)
		2) Good working relationships and social connections (15.05%)	Negatively (75.68%)
		3) Good communication (15.05%)	Negatively (55.88%)
		4) Mutual respect (14.70%)	Not at all (65.71%)
		5) Recognising individuals and their opinions (12.54%)	Negatively and Not at all (both 40.00%)
	Staff	1) Good communication (17.07%)	Negatively (56.13%)
		2) Psychological safety (15.30%)	Not at all (64.29%)
		3) Mutual respect (15.02%)	Not at all (69.72%)
		4) Good working relationships and social connection (14.93%)	Negatively (70.07%)
		5) Recognising individuals and their opinions (10.45%)	Not at all (49.47%)
Policies and practices	Students	1) Work-life balance (18.81%)	Positively (56.10%)
		2) Flexibility (18.35%)	Positively (92.50%)
		3) Management of workloads (14.22%)	Negatively (41.94%)
		4) Support systems and services (14.22%)	Negatively (48.39%)
		5) Recognition and rewards (11.01%)	Negatively (58.33%)
	Staff	1) Flexibility (17.59%)	Positively (92.76%)
		2) Work-life balance (17.36%)	Positively (50.99%)
		3) Management of workloads (15.22%)	Negatively (59.85%)
		4) Recognition and rewards (11.84%)	Not at all (52.88%)
		5) Contracts and secure working arrangements (11.05%)	Not at all (78.95%)
Institutional attributes	Students	1) Fairness (15.42%)	Not at all (74.19%)
		2) Culture of understanding and empathy (14.02%)	Negatively (55.17%)
		3) Culture of respect and tolerance (14.02%)	Not at all (58.62%)
		4) Transparency (12.15%)	Negatively (46.15%)
		5) Encouraging learning from mistakes (11.68%)	Not at all (60.87%)
	Staff	1) Culture of respect and tolerance (15.83%)	Not at all (63.16%)
		2) Fairness (15.59%)	Not at all (79.97%)
		3) Transparency (15.59%)	Negatively (52.27%)
		4) Culture of understanding and empathy (13.60%)	Not at all (46.09%)
		5) Empowerment (11.37%)	Not at all (51.55%)

Student and staff responses to the question of whether digital or hybrid education had a positive, negative, or any impact on wellbeing in the areas identified as having the greatest impact under “Community and culture” are very similar. Both groups broadly stated that psychological safety and mutual respect were unaffected by digitalisation, whereas working relationships and social connection, and communication were affected negatively. Student opinions on the impact of digital and hybrid education on the recognition of individuals and their work was divided, with an equal share of responses finding it not affected and negatively affected, whereas staff found that this aspect was not affected at all. Under “Policies and practices”, both respondent groups considered their work-life balance and the flexibility of their working or learning/studying arrangements to have improved in a digital or hybrid environment. However, it is striking that both groups found that while their work-life balance improved, digital or hybrid education also had a negative impact on their workloads. A potential explanation for this seemingly contradictory result was provided by participants of the student focus group (see below): overall work-life-balance seems to have improved during the pandemic because staff and students spent more time at home and less time commuting. However, because of the new digital habit of booking classes and meetings back to back, workload intensity may have increased. Teachers and students may also have needed time to adjust and find workable ways to learn and study in new circumstances.

It is worth highlighting that student responses tend to be slightly more negative than staff responses under “Policies and practices” and “Institutional attributes”. Many students reported that digital or hybrid education had a negative impact on workloads, support systems and services, as well as on recognition and rewards, whereas for a large proportion of staff, only workloads were negatively affected under “Policies and practices”. Under “Institutional attributes”, students observed a negative impact on the culture of understanding and empathy as well as on transparency, whereas staff only saw transparency as having been negatively affected (though with a bigger share of responses).

One important contextual factor to consider when contemplating these results is that the effects of digital and hybrid education provision are difficult to disentangle from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, as one was the result of the other. Residual impacts of the pandemic experience might therefore affect perceptions of digitally enhanced learning and teaching.

Respondents were also invited to share any additional important aspects for their wellbeing not included in the survey list. Most of the free-text student responses stressed the importance of high-quality teaching and learning materials, as well as easy and universal access to resources and infrastructure. Most free-text responses by staff, on the other hand, highlighted the need for institutions to contain workloads, offer development and career opportunities, ensure a diverse and inclusive working environment, invest in adequate resources and infrastructure, and guarantee contract security as well as fair pay and pension schemes. A high number of staff responses also stressed the importance of an institutional culture that treats staff members as valued, respected individuals, rather than as a disposable resource.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP

In an effort to capture a broader variety of student perspectives on wellbeing than could be provided by the group alone, an online focus group was organised in June 2022, gathering nine students from five of the group member institutions (see Annex 1). The students were a mix of graduate and undergraduate students. Some of the undergraduates had no pre-Covid experience of higher education.

During the focus group, participating students were asked about the aspects of university life affecting their wellbeing, as well as what they consider to be the institution’s responsibility to provide for their wellbeing. The responses provided by focus group participants generally support the results of the student survey, such as the perception of increased workloads in an online environment, as well as the widespread appreciation of more flexible learning opportunities, for example through hybrid class delivery or a mix of synchronous and asynchronous tasks. Focus group participants stressed that this latter point should be retained by higher education institutions in the long term.

A few key themes from these conversations are outlined below. They capture areas that the focus group participants identified as an institutional responsibility.

Provision of high-quality learning and teaching

Focus group participants highlighted high-quality, pedagogically sound, learning and teaching as a core responsibility of higher education institutions. This includes the provision of easily accessible and inclusive guidance and learning materials (for example, for students with disabilities, neurodiversity or learning difficulties).

Provision of mental and physical health support

Participants stressed that it was within the remit of a higher education institution to ensure easy access to mental health services who are quick to respond, especially in crisis situations. Another institutional responsibility identified by focus group participants was the creation of safe spaces to report issues without fear, for instance if a student has experienced bullying or sexual harassment. Furthermore, students considered sports facilities important to supporting their physical health.

Provision of spaces for learning, studying and resting

One additional insight from the student focus group is the central relevance of universally and easily accessible places (for example, a library, cafeteria), which provide opportunities for socialising, studying and peer-learning. Focus group participants agreed that, even though they were in favour of maintaining some degree of digital learning and teaching in the long term, higher education institutions should also ensure the continued provision of such spaces.

Inclusivity and students as partners

Focus group participants expected institutions to approach their students as partners in rather than recipients of education. Such an approach includes consideration of students' individual learning needs and granting students sufficient flexibility and autonomy regarding their learning path, as well as aspects like class attendance and homework delivery methods.

Focus group participants also pointed out institutional responsibility for creating an inclusive environment, for example by catering to various dietary restrictions (including vegan) in the cafeteria.

Challenges and avenues for change

This section draws on lessons learned from the mapping exercise and data collection outlined above and highlights a few select challenges, key considerations and recommendations. These are for institutional level consideration, and thus cover both students and staff. They are primarily addressed to institutional leadership and other decision-makers. However, as will become evident in this section, leaders and their policies alone cannot bring about meaningful, sustainable change: they are part of a much bigger ecosystem. The group therefore strongly underlines the importance of embedding policies and practices at the institution to make them a central part of institutional culture.

This section may therefore also be of interest to other members of an institution, as they too play an instrumental role in embedding a culture in which wellbeing is front and centre.

🕒 RECOMMENDATION #1

As an initial step, student and staff wellbeing should be clearly addressed in an institution's policies and strategies, so that rigorous application can ensure they become part of the institution's culture. The institution needs to take steps to ensure that these policies and strategies are clearly communicated to, and implemented by, staff and students alike.

WELLBEING IS COMPLEX

Results from the surveys and focus group have demonstrated that, both personally and professionally, wellbeing is affected by many factors, and that no single or small set of policies or practices is likely to make significant change. The group repeatedly returned to this fact, concluding that even though policies and practices are important drivers of change, they do not become truly effective until they form part of an institution's culture. In addition, because of the many personal and professional factors that influence individual wellbeing, it is important for institutions to recognise their staff and students as people with individual needs. While the group acknowledges that it is not realistic or practical to expect institutions to provide for the needs of every individual, they can still make a considerable difference to everyone in their communities by making a culture of wellbeing central to higher education life.

THE ENVIRONMENT AFFECTING WELLBEING IS DYNAMIC

Many aspects that affect an individual's wellbeing are the same in both in-person and digital learning and teaching. However, moving learning and teaching to an online or in-person environment can affect individuals differently, depending on their personality, social situation etc. For example, although many teachers and students struggled with emergency remote learning and teaching, others saw this new mode of delivery as an improvement for inclusivity and accessibility (for example, students with hearing or visual impairments, thanks to subtitled recordings and reading materials with adaptable font size, or students with work and/or care commitments), giving some the flexibility to combine their academic and private lives.

These and the following examples illustrate how wellbeing is a complex and dynamic issue, which calls for continuous revisiting and the ongoing adaptation of institutional measures and services. While the experience of working and studying through a pandemic and multiple lockdowns increased demand for mental-health services at many higher education institutions, the rise in digitally enhanced learning and teaching also seems to have led to new anxieties, particularly in cases where students or staff suffer from digital poverty, or lack critical digital skills. Group members reported that some students, especially those who have so far studied mostly or entirely online, also feel insecure about the prospect of returning to in-person classes. The war in Ukraine also has a direct impact on institutions hosting Ukrainian students and teachers. Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University, for example, has set up a specific counselling service for refugees from Ukraine.⁴

RESPONSIBILITY FOR WELLBEING IS NOT ANCHORED IN EVERY INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Addressing student and staff wellbeing does not come naturally to each institution. Different countries and institutions may have different theoretical understandings and levels of awareness of wellbeing as a topic of concern. In some (national, regional or institutional) cultures, wellbeing is not necessarily seen as being in the remit of a higher education institution, it is viewed rather as a private matter, or for students but not staff. The term “wellbeing” itself may have no equivalent, a different meaning, or even several different meanings or sub-terms in other languages (for example, to describe physical vs emotional wellbeing). This may make it difficult to address wellbeing as an institutional responsibility in some contexts. However, the group unanimously felt that people are an institution’s greatest asset and all institutions have significant scope to implement strategies to support wellbeing. Embedding awareness of and responsibility for wellbeing in an institution’s culture will thus, at the very least, be a considerable communication feat.

WELLBEING REQUIRES CLEAR AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

The surveys and the student focus group highlighted the vital role of communication with peers, teachers and supervisors, as well as with the support and information services, in maintaining wellbeing. At the same time, both students and staff members thought the quality of communication had deteriorated after activities moved online as a result of the pandemic. While the challenging, and initially chaotic, conditions in which this move took place are likely to have played a part in this perception, the group also recognised that bad communication is very evident, whereas good communication tends to appear seamless and natural, and therefore goes unnoticed. While this may account for some of the opinions on communication, the survey strongly indicated that staff and students feel higher education transparency deteriorated in the move online, and that this was at least partly due to poor communication.

🔗 RECOMMENDATION #2

Institutional leaders should commit to engaging in regular, authentic and open conversations with staff and students at all levels and create robust routes for closing the feedback loop.

At the same time, a certain basic level of wellbeing is needed for communication to function adequately; after all, the group’s data collection pointed to the importance of psychological safety, (meaning the perceived safety to speak and ask questions freely,) for wellbeing. Wellbeing and good communication thus influence each other, meaning that they can create either a virtuous, or a vicious cycle.

WHERE CAN UNIVERSITIES HAVE THE BIGGEST IMPACT?

Higher education institutions have limited or no influence on some aspects of an individual's study or professional experience (for example, off-campus accommodation, pre-existing mental health issues), and these limitations should be acknowledged. However, as is evident from the group findings, practices and cultures have considerable impact on student and staff wellbeing.

Through discussion and the sharing of practice, the group identified a few key areas in which they feel universities can make a meaningful change. These are outlined below.

Leadership and resources

Authenticity and credibility are indispensable to establishing a culture of wellbeing in which students and staff trust that their teachers and managers listen, take their input to heart and will ultimately implement actions that address their needs. Attempts to establish a culture of wellbeing will only succeed across an institution if leaders set the highest standards. Leaders must accept that developing such a culture and setting such standards may at times come at a cost, but this is essential for meaningful change. One simple example of what this means in practice is using email delays so that any emails written out of hours are only sent during standard working times.

🕒 RECOMMENDATION #3

Leaders at all levels of the institution should be role-models, leading by example and visibly upholding standards and practices that support wellbeing.

Decision-makers can convey authenticity and credibility by backing their policies with sufficient resources for infrastructure, services and staffing. The University of Jyväskylä, for example, has a health and wellbeing programme which grants staff members two hours per week during work hours for physical activity, including the right to drop excess tasks, if needed.⁵ While this entails a short term reduction in productive work hours, it is a clear signal to staff members that their wellbeing is important. Encouraging physical health also supports mental health, prevents burnout and other health-related staff absences, which stabilises and even increases staff productivity in the long term, mitigating the initial short-term reduction in working hours. While the group would not like to suggest that economic considerations should be at the forefront of institutional efforts to address wellbeing, it is still worth highlighting that investing in staff health is ultimately in institutions' economic interest.

🕒 RECOMMENDATION #4

Institutions should prioritise investment, infrastructure and resources to create an environment of wellbeing; recognising that while not always easily measured, this will benefit the institution. Leaders should accept that compromises will be necessary to create a wellbeing culture.

Community

While higher education leaders must ensure that sufficient and adequate resources are being invested in their student and staff wellbeing, they need to remember that their greatest wellbeing resource is the institutional community itself. As the survey results show, community has a crucial impact on its members' wellbeing and providing the space and time for the community to support one another can be enough to promote good wellbeing with little additional investment.

By way of example, the University of Jyväskylä runs a programme through which staff members can volunteer and receive training to become so-called Goodies, i.e. mental health contacts. Goodies are easily identifiable via the university website and can be directly approached by students, in a confidential, unbureaucratic manner.⁶ This programme exists alongside the university's regular mental health service and is intended as additional support and to facilitate open communication between students and staff. Cardiff University runs a scheme putting new students in touch with more senior student mentors, who help them to settle in. This programme is managed at university level, but implemented at department level.

The Student Services Committee established by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia is another example of how an institution can draw on its community to achieve effective results.⁷ The committee is composed of students and staff and works to ensure adequate student services and facilities, such as accommodation or library opening hours. It also works with the Modena and Reggio Emilia city administrations to make both cities more student-friendly, for example by creating openly accessible study spaces with free WiFi. Cardiff University also runs the Student Champions⁸ scheme, which employs students from C40⁹ city universities as partners in institutional-level developments and projects every year.

These examples demonstrate how students and staff can actively achieve wellbeing, instead of being passive recipients of wellbeing resources, if supported and given the dedicated time to engage with such activities. The University of St Andrews promotes discussion and good practice sharing through its Community for Evidence-Led Practice in Education (CELPiE).¹⁰ A Community of Practice is the central pillar of CELPiE. It provides all members with somewhere they can seek advice and support, share good practice, develop collaborations and make suggestions in an inclusive and supportive environment that encourages open discussion.

Seeing students and staff as equal partners¹¹ also means that they should be consulted, and their views given significant credence in all major decision-making processes, for example by having representatives from across the university community on consultation and decision-making bodies at every level. This approach will only work if the institution 1) acknowledges and accepts that not every student or staff member will always be in a position to invest additional time in representation, and 2) recognises, acknowledges and rewards students and staff who, when able, take on such extra efforts.

The University of St Andrews, for example, awards higher education achievement records to students in representative positions, offers paid sabbatical positions, and trains students to prepare them for the work ahead.¹²

RECOMMENDATION #5

Engage students and staff as active and equal agents and partners in wellbeing, providing them with dedicated time to support members of their community.

RECOMMENDATION #6

Acknowledge and reward exceptional efforts by students and staff, without establishing this as the required 'norm' for success and career progression; accepting that individuals have personal and professional circumstances and boundaries affecting their actions, and that these may change over time.

Transparency and creating a culture of inclusiveness and mutual respect

As indicated by the survey results, both students and staff highly value decision-making transparency. Clearly established policies and principles governing conduct and decisions are a first step to achieving transparency. Bern University of Applied Sciences, for example, has a Code of Conduct and Guiding Principles,¹³ which clearly state the values and behaviour that all staff members and students are expected to apply daily, thus minimising the hierarchy between staff and students while also providing a common framework for mutual respect. The University of Continuing Education Krems also has a Code of Conduct.¹⁴ Bielefeld University maintains a “Living Document” in which students and academics discuss and note their expectations to form a quasi-contract.¹⁵

Written codes and principles only have real impact once they are embedded in daily experiences at the institution. This can take the form of many seemingly small improvements. The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, for example, recently reviewed its study programme guides to eliminate gender stereotypes. The European Union’s Horizon 2020 EQUAL_IST (Gender Equality Plans for Information Sciences and Technology Research Institutions) research and innovation project was an important stimulus for this inclusive communication practice, which aims to support gender equality at Information Sciences and Technology (IST) research institutions.¹⁶

The group also found that even smaller-scale actions can have a positive effect on student and staff wellbeing. Extra-curricular events that provide an occasion for students and staff to socialise, can help to “humanise” staff and make them seem more approachable. Similarly, videoconferences have (albeit not always intentionally,) allowed teachers and superiors to look like individuals with flaws and private lives.¹⁷ Such practices may help minimise potential hierarchies between various categories of staff members and students.

The relatively recent advent of videoconferences, originally a largely unanticipated practice, which affects the relationships and communications between students and staff, once again demonstrates the need to continuously adapt wellbeing measures to changing circumstances. While the intrusion of someone’s private life into the virtual classroom (for example, through a surprise visit by a teacher’s child or pet) can serve as an ice-breaker, it can also be a cause of distress, for example if individuals do not have a private study space at home, or are generally uncomfortable sharing views of their home. In addition, and as highlighted by the student focus group participants, virtual backgrounds do not always work and consume a lot of bandwidth. Institutions and teachers need to remain sensitive to the specific context in which interactions between staff members and students take place, and bear such constraints in mind when designing digital education.

➤ RECOMMENDATION #7

Set and clearly communicate institutional values and expectations through an Institutional Code of Conduct, including appropriate sanctions for violations. Set rigorous policies and practices that everyone at the institution must comply with, and which lead to wellbeing values and expectations becoming embedded in institutional culture. The communication of a Code of Conduct needs to be accompanied by student and staff training on how to live it.

➤ RECOMMENDATION #8

Leaders should seek to minimise unhelpful hierarchies and recognise the importance of humble and ethical leadership, celebrating the equally important wellbeing contributions made by all staff and students, regardless of perceived status or importance.

Institutional reflection and assessment

Institutions currently find themselves moving away from emergency online learning and teaching to either a more digital or entirely on-site mode of learning and teaching. At the same time, the lessons and experiences of the pandemic years are still fresh in the minds of institutional leaders, teachers and students and reflection on the future direction institutes will take is ongoing. The group advocates that now is the perfect moment for institutions to take stock of how they have addressed and supported their members' wellbeing thus far, and to determine how they can place wellbeing at the heart of institutional culture, for the good of the whole community and the institution itself.

Various national frameworks and self-assessment tools have been developed to help institutions on this journey. Topic-specific self-assessment tools (for example, Stepchange developed by Universities UK¹⁸ or Butler University's Student Well-being Institutional Support Survey (SWISS)¹⁹) provide resources that might help institutions evaluate the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of their measures to support wellbeing. If self-assessment is not desirable or feasible, such frameworks can also provide guidance when drafting or revising the university wellbeing strategy. For example, the University of York's revised strategy was inspired by three different frameworks, including Stepchange.²⁰

Whatever the chosen approach used to review a wellbeing framework or measures, such changes should always be context-sensitive, involve the genuine engagement of relevant stakeholders and be conducted with the highest standards of ethical leadership.

🔗 RECOMMENDATION #9

Institutions should consider reviewing their current approach to wellbeing, identifying areas for enhancement and ways to embed wellbeing at the heart of their culture. Continuous reflection on this important matter is also encouraged.

Conclusions

Wellbeing is multidimensional, and the most important factors affecting it vary from individual to individual. The aspects with the greatest impact on positive wellbeing are broadly similar across digital and in-person approaches; nevertheless, considerable changes in wellbeing have occurred following the move to digital during the pandemic. This development has helped de-stigmatise any lack of wellbeing and put wellbeing on the map for higher education policy²¹ and decision-makers. However, it has also highlighted gaps in institutional approaches to meeting student and staff needs and led to the emergence of entirely new wellbeing needs and challenges.

The group encourages institutions to use the recommendations in this report as key starting points for creating an institutional wellbeing environment and culture that will benefit everyone.

Annexes

ANNEX 1: STUDENT CONTRIBUTORS

The group would like to thank the following student focus group participants for their time and valuable insights:

- ◆ University of Jyväskylä, Finland: Fanni Rantala and Emmi Tossavainen
- ◆ Bielefeld University, Germany: Hannah Hilliger and Lena Rosenfeld
- ◆ University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy: Maria Lourdes Dall'Oglio
- ◆ Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland: Franziska Winkler and Loretta Walther
- ◆ University of St Andrews, United Kingdom: Anastasia Ellis and Sana Aboobacker

Special thanks are due to Ruben Janssens, who at the time of the focus group was a member of the European Students' Union's Executive Committee and the EUA Learning & Teaching Steering Committee, for co-facilitating the focus group.

Finally, the group would like to express its gratitude to Giuseppe Esposito from the students' committee of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in Italy for presenting the work of the university's Student Services Committee at a group meeting.

ANNEX 2: STUDENT AND STAFF SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

NB: students and staff received an almost identical questionnaire, with minimal differences in the terminology and list of aspects. Where present, these differences are highlighted in italics.

1. Answers to this survey are submitted by:

- An individual
- A group

2. Please select the five aspects of university community and culture with the biggest impact on your wellbeing:

- Psychological safety (i.e. the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up) and a safe *learning/working (for students/staff)* environment
- A sense of institutional connection and belonging
- Inclusivity and accessibility
- A sense of a fair and sustainable environment
- Recognising individuals and their opinions
- Mutual respect between all members of the institution
- Good working (*in staff survey only*) relationships and social connection with other members of the university community
- A shared culture
- A shared vision
- Connection between governance and people
- Good communication with colleagues and managers
 - a. Follow-up question on each of the top five aspects selected: How has this aspect been affected by digitalised/hybrid education?
 - Negatively
 - Positively
 - Not at all

3. Please select the five aspects of university policies and practices with the biggest impact on your wellbeing:

- Work-life balance
- Management of workloads
- Recognition and reward
- Flexibility in *learning/studying/working arrangements (for students/staff)*
- Support systems and services (e.g., physical and mental health and wellbeing, financial and legal advice (*in student survey only*))
- Contracts and secure working arrangements (*staff survey only*)
- Co-creation and collaboration
- High quality facilities and resources
- Sustainable management and interaction practices
 - a. Follow-up question on each of the top five aspects selected: How has this aspect been affected by digitalised/hybrid education?
 - Negatively
 - Positively
 - Not at all

4. Please select the five institutional attributes with the biggest impact on your wellbeing:

- A culture of understanding and empathy
 - A culture of respect and tolerance
 - Fairness in decisions and actions
 - Empowerment (freedom to have a voice)
 - Encouraging learning from mistakes
 - Transparency in decision making
 - Diversity and multi-culturalism
 - Supporting agency
 - Innovative and embracing of new experiences
- a. Follow-up question on each of the top five aspects selected: How has this aspect been affected by digitalised/hybrid education?
- Negatively
 - Positively
 - Not at all

5. Is there any aspect that is important to your wellbeing as a student, but which has not been covered by the list above? / Open text /

ANNEX 3: EUA LEARNING & TEACHING THEMATIC PEER GROUPS

As part of its work on learning and teaching, EUA engages with leadership and professional staff overseeing or implementing learning and teaching activities at the institutional level. Coordinating the work of a set of Thematic Peer Groups is a key aspect of EUA's work in connecting with university communities. The groups consist of university representatives selected through a call for participation; the core of their remit is to:

- discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European universities;
- contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key recommendations on the selected theme.

The 2022 Thematic Peer Groups were organised as part of the DIGI-HE project with a focus on digitally enhanced learning and teaching (DELT). The Thematic Peer Groups, active from March 2022 until February 2023, facilitated discussion among group members through their engagement in peer-learning exercises and exchange of experience. Similarly, the group members contributed their expertise to develop EUA's input in policy debates, such as the Bologna Process.

Each group was chaired by a member representative from one university and supported by a coordinator from within the EUA Secretariat. The group "Needs and wellbeing of students and staff" was additionally supported by a coordinator from within the DIGI-HE Consortium. The groups met in several online meetings organised throughout 2022 and despite challenges presented by the virtual setting, were successful in identifying the major issues related to all three themes – needs and wellbeing of students and staff, collaborative teaching practices, and digitally competent teachers.

Each group discussed the key challenges related to its respective theme, explored ways to overcome challenges through innovative practices and approaches, and drew conclusions as regards institutional policies and processes that would support the enhancement of learning and teaching. In addition, the groups served as platform for members to put forward and discuss other issues relevant to the theme. Members of the groups also presented the outcomes at the 2023 European Learning & Teaching Forum, with the objective of obtaining feedback on the groups' conclusions and recommendations.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group 'Needs and wellbeing of students and staff'

(starting with the group chair, then proceeding by alphabetical order of the country name):

- **University of St Andrews (United Kingdom)**
 - Gerald Prescott, Associate Dean for Education (Faculty of Science; chair)
 - Gosia Mitka, Associate Dean for Education (Arts and Divinity)
- **University for Continuing Education Krems (Austria)**
 - Christina Hell, Head of Teaching Innovation and Digital Competence Development
- **Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (Georgia)**
 - Tinatin Davitashvili, Head of Institutional Development and Authorization Unit at Quality Assurance Service
 - Irma Grdzeldze, Head of Quality Assurance Service
 - Sopio Idadze, Chief Specialist at Quality Assurance Service
- **Bielefeld University (Germany)**
 - Meike Vogel, Director of Center for Learning and Teaching
 - Lea Bachus, Student

- **Democritus University of Thrace (Greece)**
 - Zoe Gavriilidou, Vice Rector of Academic Affairs and Student Welfare
- **University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy)**
 - Tindara Addabbo, Rector Delegate for Equal Opportunities
 - Giacomo Cabri, Rector Delegate for Teaching
- **Bern University of Applied Sciences (Switzerland)**
 - Jochen Schellinger, Vice-President for Teaching
- **Cardiff University (United Kingdom)**
 - Stephen Rutherford, Academic Lead for Education Fellowship Programmes and Learning Communities Project
 - Hannah Doe, Students' Union President
- **Coordinators:**
 - Helene Peterbauer, Policy Analyst, European University Association (EUA)
 - Pieta Sikström, Project Researcher, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Endnotes

- 1 Dodge, R., Daly, A.P., Huyton, J. & Sanders, L.D., 2012, 'The challenge of defining wellbeing', in *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3), pp. 222-235. [doi:10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4](https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v2i3.4) (accessed 19/10/2022).
- 2 In this report, the word "digital" is largely used as an encompassing term for all kinds of education formats and modes which use either partially or fully online digital learning and teaching methods and spaces. However, the student and staff survey conducted by this group enquired about "digital or hybrid education", to specify its interest in the impact of both fully and partially digitalised education methods on aspects affecting the respondents' wellbeing. The report section summarising results from this survey thus makes this terminological distinction, although the rest of the report does not.
- 3 Differences concern the wording (e.g., "learning/studying" vs "working") and listed aspects (e.g., "contracts and secure working arrangements" was only listed in the staff survey).
- 4 See <https://www.facebook.com/TbilisiStateUniversity/posts/pfbid02EGmcPtCeE2ysQGzfhPpB2UWTMkawbXjHhAuzYguVNempDA7r8VFCEsqRGqyknuDvl> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 5 See <https://www.jyu.fi/sport/en/research/research-projects/lily> (accessed 27/10/2022).
- 6 See <https://www.jyu.fi/studentlife-old/en/wellbeing/goodies> (accessed 26/10/2022).
- 7 See <https://www.unimore.it/ateneo/tavolosstudenti.html> (accessed 08/11/2022).
- 8 See <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jobs/what-we-can-offer/teaching-innovation-and-support/working-with-student-champions> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 9 See <https://www.c40.org/about-c40/> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 10 See <https://celpie.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 11 See also Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K., 2014, *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education* (Higher Education Academy, York). https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/resources/engagement_through_partnership_1568036621.pdf (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 12 Further information is available in the University of St Andrews' Student Academic Representation Policy. See <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/policy/academic-policies-quality-and-standards-student-academic-representation/student-academic-representation.pdf> (accessed 15/11/2022).
- 13 See the Code of Conduct via https://www.bfh.ch/dam/jcr:f6ef0f24-dce0-44d8-9a97-b444038cbb84/Code-of-Conduct_BFH_EN_v3.pdf and the Guiding Principles via <https://www.bfh.ch/en/about-bfh/strategy-2023-2026/#bfh-s-guiding-principles> (accessed 27/01/2023).

- 14 See <https://www.donau-uni.ac.at/en/university/about/code-of-conduct.html> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 15 See <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/lehre/living-document/Living-Document-Uni-Bielefeld-English.pdf> (accessed 01/12/2022).
- 16 See <https://equal-ist.eu/overview/> (accessed 08/11/2022).
- 17 See also Browne, J., 2021, "'Excuse the cat...'" Reflections on online mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic', in *Medical Education* 55(6), pp. 673-675. <https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14445> (accessed 26/10/2022).
- 18 See <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/stepchange-mentally-healthy-universities> (accessed 26/10/2022).
- 19 See <https://www.butler.edu/well-being/institute-wellbeing/swiss/> (accessed 26/10/2022).
- 20 See <https://www.york.ac.uk/students/health/strategy/> (accessed 19/10/2022).
- 21 One example is the increased attention mental health received in higher education reports. See, for example, European Union, 2022, *The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people: Policy responses in European countries* (EU, Luxembourg). <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/publications/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-mental-health-of-young-people> (accessed 08/11/2022), or European Students' Union, 2022, *A Comparative Analysis of Mental Health among Higher Education Students: through the perspective of National Unions of Students across Europe*. <https://esu-online.org/publications/a-comparative-analysis-of-mental-health-among-higher-education-students-through-the-perspective-of-national-unions-of-students-across-europe/> (accessed 08/11/2022).

The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 48 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact their activities.

The Association provides unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, websites and publications.

This paper, prepared within the framework of the EUA-led DIGI-HE project, is one of a series of reports specifically focused on learning and teaching. It is designed to gather the knowledge and experiences of experts on the topic from across Europe. EUA's activities in learning and teaching aim at enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education provision, underline the importance of learning and teaching as a core mission and advocate for learning and teaching activities to be geared towards student learning and success.