Third space professionals and academic collaboration to embed mental wellbeing in the curriculum

Zoë Allman
De Montfort University, UK

Rachel Davies
De Montfort University, UK

Abstract

Collaboration between third space professionals and academics has facilitated the effective implementation of embedded mental wellbeing in the curriculum at a UK university. De Montfort University in Leicester aimed to achieve a whole provider approach to embedding mental wellbeing, bringing expertise, skills and knowledge from third space professionals and academics to the task.

A vital element of this activity was to develop face-to-face course-specific provision that had traditionally been delivered by third space professionals into a suite of downloadable teaching materials for academics to use in the classroom. This would facilitate the embedding of mental wellbeing content within the curriculum, aligned with taught academic content. This collaboration between colleagues developed a state of interdependence, with colleagues relying on one another to effectively implement embedded mental wellbeing. The benefits of mutual trust, a culture of collaboration, and empowerment developed across the teams (both academic and professional third space) who had hitherto not worked together.

Keywords: embedding wellbeing, mental wellbeing, collaboration, third space, student support.

Introduction and context

De Montfort University (DMU) recognised that the number of students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) for mental health reasons continued to rise. With 29,000 registered students, primarily at its Leicester (UK) campus, 19% of DMU's student population declared a disability on entry and one third of these were due to mental health.

As a large institution with a diverse student body, DMU had initiated numerous activities to enhance mental health and wellbeing support, and in 2019 joined Advance HE in the first national Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum project (Advance HE, 2019). DMU had previously undertaken projects to implement a whole provider approach to universal design for learning in support of inclusive practices in curriculum delivery. Additionally, DMU had introduced course-specific wellbeing support provision delivered by third space professionals in response to needs identified by academic colleagues. In 2019, DMU scoped a project that recognised prior activity, and empowered academics to further support students within the classroom without the need to bring a limited and greatly sought after pool of 'specialist' or 'expert' colleagues in to deliver wellbeing content.

The Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum project started in 2019 and was soon impacted by the social distancing measures of 2020-21 during the COVID-19 pandemic. With increased media attention on mental health and wellbeing due to students facing isolation, there was growing awareness of the need to focus on and ensure mental wellbeing for students and staff (Student Minds, 2020). To continue enabling students to fully engage in their higher education experience at DMU, which included both curriculum and student support, our project required making greater use of online and blended approaches due to the impact of the pandemic on everyday working practices.

Third space professionals, experts in mental wellbeing

Prior to the project, a small team of third space professionals, experts in the field of mental health, disability and wellbeing, would provide support to the curriculum by responding to requests from academics to deliver content within taught sessions. Whitchurch (2012) recognised third space professional staff working in student welfare. Some of the team working within a larger Student Welfare team provided a service referred to as 'Course Specific Initiatives' (CSI). To improve student engagement with support services in mental

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wellbeing this team worked to embed wellbeing into the curriculum, supporting a concept championed by Thomas (2012), who identified that when professional support is delivered through the curriculum, student engagement improves, and students are more likely to access support in the future.

Academic colleagues leading the curriculum who were particularly conscious of the impact of mental wellbeing on student learning reflected on their practice, identified a need that required addressing via an initiative, discussed with the CSI team, and the initiative was developed to suit individual requirements. The CSI approach was originally developed with collaboration between academics and Student Welfare teams in mind, but whilst there had been some co-delivery, the use of these initiatives tended to be stand-alone or co-designed, delivered in on-campus timetabled sessions by a member of the CSI team and in many cases with limited academic involvement due to time and workload pressures. As Parkes et al. (2014, p.5) acknowledge, collaborative working between professional and academic staff is 'particularly important for student engagement, retention and success'. These initiatives were considered impactful by academics who had engaged the services of the central team, and were often scheduled again in subsequent cycles.

However, there had been a desire to further empower academics to deliver the material themselves, embedding support activities as and when required. This made the curriculum more responsive to student need, enabling mental wellbeing content to be delivered at the perceived point-of-need, aligned to Carpe Diem principles identified by Salmon and Wright (2014). Co-delivered with academics, this kind of learning in the eyes of students had contributed to the overall sense of a course as a supportive space, which feedback from DMU students indicated was valued highly. The ability to present to whole classes reduced resource demands on the small CSI team.

The CSI team had considered alternative offers and methods for expansion, but it was the renewed focus on embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum and the pandemic that provided the catalyst for change. An enhanced online offer was required, one that empowered and enabled more academic colleagues to deliver student mental wellbeing material themselves at timely intervals within their existing curriculum plans.

HealthyDMU philosophy and online portal

In the preceding years DMU had initiated numerous projects to support student health and wellbeing, increasing student awareness of and access to support materials and activities, across a range of wellbeing matters to encourage all students to stay well. DMU hosted this support via a suite of webpages, the HealthyDMU online hub, which acted as a single portal to the whole university approach to support student health and wellbeing (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). As the pandemic forced the need for greater online delivery, expansion of the existing web-based platform that supported health and wellbeing was a natural place to house further mental wellbeing materials (Parkin and Brown, 2020).

DMU's approach, the HealthyDMU philosophy, recognised mental wellbeing as relevant to all. This position was 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 et al., 2008). The DMU approach aimed to reduce wellbeing barriers to facilitate student success, through establishing pro-active approaches to mental wellbeing in an environment that is health promoting.

Method and approach

Creating downloadable tutor resources

The CSI team reviewed the support topics requested by academics for content that could be adapted for online delivery via the creation of downloadable tutor resources. Each resource included a short slide deck ready for use with students, accompanied by tutor notes to enhance the on-screen/visual messages. Each was carefully designed to be used as a stand-alone, individual resource, embedded into academic activity where appropriate to the topic. The academic was empowered to become the lead facilitator and make use of the resources in synchronous or asynchronous teaching. The activities provided advice and guidance, and encouraged students to engage with existing HealthyDMU hub resources.

This created a bank of resources, ready and available without the need for requests from academics to initiate the development process. When used in taught settings the content provided opportunities for students to learn some strategies to support mental wellbeing and receive signposting to the range of mental wellbeing support available across DMU. This approach facilitated embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum; the university

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encouraged its community to 'thrive and succeed to their best potential' (Universities UK, 2020, p.2).

The review of frequently requested support topics initially identified the downloadable tutor resources for development. These included '5 Ways to Wellbeing', 'Settling In', and 'Keeping Motivated', alongside some that responded to identified need but had a more bespoke audience range, including 'Preparing for Placements'.

Collaboration between third space professionals and academics

DMU is home to a community of academic colleagues recognised within and beyond the university for academic excellence in teaching and learning. Many within this community have been recognised as University and National Teaching Fellows. This community, recognised for their ability to champion pedagogic innovation, reflect on practice, and support the development of others, were crucial stakeholders. These academics engaged in the development of the downloadable tutor resources and provided valuable feedback during the development phase. As Springou (2023) recognised, there is a need for cooperation and collaboration between academic and professional services colleagues, built on 'open and effective communication' and 'a shared ethos'.

This collaboration relied upon professional input to support student mental wellbeing and existing course specific approaches from the CSI team. The development of mutual trust between the third space colleagues and academics (Little and Green, 2021) created new networks of support, encouragement and enhancement, and raised the visibility of third space colleagues (Hall, 2022). The role of trust is also acknowledged by Perkins et al. (2010) who recognise that collaboration must involve this, alongside commitment from collaborators, a shared vision, and recognition of different attributes, aligned with the key concepts for successful collaboration identified by Bayerlein and McGrath (2016). Crossley and Corbyn (2010) include the need for clarity around what the collaboration aims to achieve, as key to success.

Having recognised the role of academic 'experts' within the field of pedagogy and learning design, alongside the role of third space professional 'experts' in the field of student mental wellbeing and support, the university connected different communities (Denney, 2022). DMU embraced a cross-institutional collaborative approach to resource development,

through 'a complementary perception of the collaborators roles and responsibilities' (Bayerlein and McGrath, 2016, p.1102).

This collaborative approach built on an existing culture within DMU where third space professionals were encouraged to take part in pedagogic development including applying for recognition through Advance HE's Professional Standards Framework (PSF), supporting Whitchurch's recognition that third space professional services colleagues further developed 'academic credentials' (2008, p.379; 2012; Hulme, 2022). Floyd and Smart (2023) further championed inclusiveness of professional recognition schemes for professional service colleagues. Responding to a sector-wide consultation, Advance HE's updated PSF framework included greater emphasis on collaboration, an area not previously recognised within the PSF (Currens and Alexandrou, 2023).

Resource hosting in an established online portal

Supporting content in the student-facing HealthyDMU hub was the HealthyDMU Staff Toolkit, an online resource for staff that provided additional detail and information to facilitate staff support for student health and wellbeing. As academic staff across DMU were already aware that this was the place for such materials, this was identified as the place to host the new downloadable tutor resources. This provided greatest support to academics as they endeavoured to effectively embed mental wellbeing aligned to academic content and assessment requirements in the online learning environment created by the pandemic, later the blended learning environment as lockdowns eased.

Discussion

Resource engagement and usage

Within 18 months the downloadable tutor resources achieved 217 downloads. Academic colleagues made use of the new resources and recommended these to others, and provided feedback that thanked the CSI team for the 'great content', which was recognised as 'superb'.

This established new connections between third space professionals and academics which enabled CSI team engagement with a whole faculty within the university that had not previously engaged. Through this extended awareness of the availability of expertise

and resources within DMU, CSI increased its reach from 35 (2019-20) to 52 academic programmes (2022-23), and ensured activity reached and impacted the experience of 57% of the university's student population.

Reflections on resource usage

Academics reported feeling more empowered to deliver student support and mental wellbeing messaging, in a way that allowed for flexibility and responsiveness to student need, by using resources at appropriate points within the curriculum content. During the initial launch of these resources online surveys sought feedback from over 80 academic and professional services staff to monitor awareness of the increased focus on embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum, and to ensure preparedness for and embracing of the concept. Having released the resources, two thirds of respondents rated their ability to embed mental wellbeing in the curriculum as 'Excellent' or 'Good', the remaining third indicated room for improvement at an early stage, with some not having yet attempted it.

The CSI team identified that the development of the downloadable resources made it possible for the team to respond to bespoke last-minute requests from academic subject areas not yet addressed via existing resources. Prior to the project and the pandemic this was more difficult given the demands on the team throughout the academic year.

With the return to on-campus teaching DMU retained the asynchronous tutor resource offer as these resources had received positive engagement and feedback. The resources were recognised as being responsive to identified need and academics felt empowered to use them in taught activity, embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum.

One key issue for consideration in future developments of this kind is consideration of the comfort levels of academic staff when delivering mental wellbeing topics. For third space professionals embedded within mental health, wellbeing or disability teams, it can be easy to overestimate the confidence of academic staff in delivering content around such topics. The choice of material, the advice of academic colleagues, and the availability of the HealthyDMU hub addressed student needs to learn wellbeing strategies whilst enabling academic staff to act within personal comfort levels, guided by materials designed to maintain appropriate professional boundaries.

Broader impact of collaboration

In 2023, the National Student Survey introduced a question inviting students to reflect on how well their university communicates information about mental wellbeing support services. Amongst DMU respondents, 76.4% responded favourably and recognised the positive impact on the student experience that comes from the range of activity happening within the university to address and embed mental wellbeing.

Governance of the project at the university level facilitated networking opportunities, new introductions, and led to the expansion of activity based on best practice. Floyd (2021) recognises the need for strategic consideration of professional recognition for all who support student learning experiences. DMU recognised the increasing emergence of third space professionals in the development of teaching and learning resources, awarding colleagues funding to support further activity through the university's 'Academic Innovation Projects'. This extension and broader impact supports the views of McIntosh and Nutt (2022, para. 8) who recognise that collaboration between academic and the third space professionals facilitates the 'pursuit of innovation, thematic communities of practice and genuine partnership'. Duke (2003) acknowledges the need for collaboration in higher education innovation, creating a focus on expertise and working practices (Whitchurch, 2012). Collaboration across the university built institutional cohesion and supported staff to expand their skills and expertise (Macfarlane, 2010), and through this combining of strengths we 'build resilient institutions capable of facing the future' (Springou, 2023, para. 11).

Third space colleagues presented alongside academics at the university's teaching and learning conference, and externally on the topic of embedding mental wellbeing. Impact has been extended through inclusion of examples in a national collaborative enhancement project funded by the Quality Assurance Agency which focused on the methods and benefits of embedding mental wellbeing, drawing on good practice examples from within DMU and other providers to further support development across the higher education sector. These examples support Whitchurch's (2012, p.5) view that there is growing 'evidence of increasing alliance between professional and academic staff'.

Reflections from a third space professional

This paper has been a collaborative piece by a third space professional and academic leader. This section of the article provides space for our third space professional author to reflect on first-hand experiences.

The culture of DMU, where third space professionals are included within the pedagogic community, enabled me to develop my own practice as an educator and increased my understanding of the learning environment in which the students I am supporting work. Working with academic colleagues to produce these materials, and more widely on the CSI programme, had wider benefits too. For example, where academic staff were engaged with HealthyDMU/CSI they seemed very open to approach us with questions on their students' behalf and were active in referring students for support. And on the other side of the coin, knowing more about how courses, classrooms and modules work and were delivered meant that support services could respond proactively to likely issues rather than wait for students to appear with a concern. The greatest benefit, however, was that by working collaboratively with my academic colleagues, we took learning about mental wellbeing to the students who need it, directly. That had important equality implications because not all students feel comfortable in using standalone Student Welfare services; DMU's institutional data indicated that female students, for example, made proportionately greater use of services than male students. So, collaboration between academic staff and third space professionals was crucial in addressing key issues facing the university.

Conclusion and recommendations

Vital to DMU's project to embed mental wellbeing in the curriculum, academic and third space professionals collaborated to develop new resources for use in the classroom, developed existing resource sharing platforms, and raised awareness of this activity through regular engagement with a stakeholder group of over 80 colleagues, and latterly the wider university community.

The new resources exceeded 200 downloads in 18 months, and were positively received and engaged with by academic colleagues. New connections formed between academic and third space colleagues, which improved the reach and impact of wellbeing activity

within the curriculum. Students recognised the ways in which DMU communicated information about student support services and mental wellbeing. Colleagues directly involved in collaborations went on to lead further projects and be recognised beyond the institution for their work in this space. DMU was recognised for its collaborative work to embed mental wellbeing and awarded a 'Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence' by Advance HE in 2022.

The following lessons were taken from collaborations between third space professional and academic colleagues to embed mental wellbeing:

- Recognise and utilise complementary expertise. The knowledge of third space professionals and the pedagogic skillset of academics combines for the most effective development of teaching resource.
- Share new resources via existing platforms that already engage staff. This ensures new content is accessible and provides reassurance of authenticity in the quality of the content.
- Resources originally developed in response to individual requests for specific audiences can be adapted to utilise frequently required content. This facilitates wider, swifter replication and use, increasing impact and reach.
- Online, downloadable resources facilitate point-of-need delivery. This creates space for faster responses to new requests.
- Academics are empowered to deliver mental wellbeing messaging when it is provided in clear, recognisable formats (e.g. slide decks with tutor notes) that are easily adapted for use in the classroom.
- The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the development of resources focused on enhancing student mental wellbeing.

This project created a new collaborative working approach between academic and third space professional colleagues, at a time when working together was challenging due to external factors, but which has ultimately led to benefits for the whole university community.

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Author details

Zoë Allman is Associate Dean (Academic) at De Montfort University and leader of university-wide activity to embed mental wellbeing in the curriculum.

Rachel Davies is Disability Officer in Student and Academic Services at De Montfort University and leader of 'CSI'.

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