

# INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO EMBEDDING WELLBEING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Ciara Duignan<sup>1,2</sup>, Deirdre Byrne<sup>3</sup>, Jessica Surdey<sup>4</sup>, & Denise McGrath<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Public Health, Physiotherapy & Sports Science, University College Dublin (Ireland)*

<sup>2</sup>*Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics, University College Dublin (Ireland)*

<sup>3</sup>*Department of Business and Social Science, Atlantic Technological University (Ireland)*

<sup>4</sup>*School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin (Ireland)*

## Abstract

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing continues to be a foremost concern in Higher Education (HE), as rates of students presenting with mental health conditions, distress and poor wellbeing increase and as demand for counselling and support services exceeds supply. The age range of students in third level education often coincides with the challenging transitional period of emerging adulthood, where instabilities are further compounded by academic, financial, and social pressures. As HE institutes are distinct settings where academic work, hobbies, social life, as well as health and other services are often integrated, HE presents a unique opportunity to address this wider societal concern through a systems-based lens. Despite calls for holistic, whole of institution approaches, a transformation of student wellbeing has yet to be realised.

During a national initiative for valuing teaching and learning in HE in Ireland, the authors hosted an engaged online event to mobilise learning and action in the student wellbeing community. The event included case study presentations from existing examples of wellbeing in the curriculum, a panel discussion on the national landscape, and an open discussion on the future of wellbeing in HE. Attendees included academic faculty, HE management, researchers, staff from health and counselling services and health promotion, student representatives, careers and support services, and others. Data were collected via the recorded oral contributions, Zoom chat, and an anonymous survey. A deductive thematic analysis was completed with the guiding concept of an institution as a system that supports wellbeing.

Findings proposed shared values as the compass for organisational culture, leaders and decision makers as key enablers of change, academic structures as both a vehicle to promote positive wellbeing and mitigate negative impacts, academic staff as the embodiment of the institution and its values, and the student voice as a guide for informed decision making.

Recognising an institution as part of a wider system of HE which is influenced by political and economic climates, there is a requirement for HE to set out its stall with respect to its purpose and responsibility to wellbeing. This affirmation could enable a shared understanding of and commitment to wellbeing across the sector, through which collaborative and system-based efforts to support wellbeing can be actioned.

**Keywords:** *Wellbeing, higher education, engaged research, systems thinking.*

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## 1. Background

Supporting student mental health and wellbeing in Higher Education (HE) continues to be a foremost concern for institutions, staff, and policy makers alike, as rates of mental illness, distress, and poor wellbeing increase, and as demand for institutional support services exceeds supply (Fox, Byrne, & Surdey, 2020). Young people in third level education are navigating the transitional period of emerging adulthood, forging their identity and meaning in a complex world with a less predictable life trajectory than generations before them. Their instability is compounded by academic, financial, and social pressures (Dooley, O'Connor, Fitzgerald, & O'Reilly, 2019), geopolitical and personal concerns (Fox et al., 2020) and declines in positive health behaviours as they adapt to autonomous living.

Irish HE policy recognises that going through third level education is a transformative experience that can change the lives of students and help them to realise their full potential. International frameworks for the future of education have proposed to model the future that we want in society—individual and collective wellbeing (OECD, 2019). A comprehensive toolkit for embedding mental health in HE has been developed in the UK (Hughes, et al. 2022), and similar approaches have been recommended by the Union of Students in Ireland National Report on Student Mental Health in

Third Level Education (2019), and the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (Fox et al., 2020), with the latter requiring reporting on the progress and implementation of the framework's recommendations (Surdey, Byrne, & Fox, 2022). HE is also highly valued in economic strategy as an essential cog in the knowledge economy, where wellbeing is increasingly coming into focus in the workplace. The Global Human Capital Trends study (Deloitte, 2020), for example, found 80% of the respondents identified wellbeing as an important or very important priority for their organisation's success.

Scaffolding these future skills needs through primary, secondary, and tertiary educational settings seems like an opportune approach. As distinct environments where academic work, hobbies, social life, and health and other services are often integrated, HE presents a unique opportunity to systemically address this wider societal concern. Recommendations for supporting student mental health and wellbeing have focused on teaching and learning, extracurricular activities, the physical environment, reimagining the understanding of 'student success', top-down leadership, student partnership, settings-based, social-ecological, and whole-of-institution approaches requiring culture and policy change (Dooris, 2001; Fox et al., 2020; NStEP, 2021; O'Farrell, 2019), yet a transformation of student wellbeing has yet to be realised. The concepts underpinning many of these recommendations and frameworks align with respect to the need for holistic and systems-based efforts (Dooris, Wills, & Newton, 2014). Using systems thinking or systems theory enables a view of a system in its entirety, interconnections between its elements and their relationships to the whole system purpose (Meadows, 2008).

Recognising the many individuals and groups undertaking efforts to address student wellbeing through the curriculum and other approaches—but also the limitations of these often individual and siloed efforts—we organised an online event to bring people together for sharing and discussion, with a view to mobilising collective effort toward transforming wellbeing in HE in Ireland. In this paper, we will discuss the findings from the event with respect to the idea of a systems-based approach to wellbeing in HE.

## 2. Methods

Hosted by the authors during the 'Valuing Ireland's Teaching and Learning' initiative by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the online event sought to bring together people from multiple disciplines and institutions who care about the future of wellbeing in HE. Invited presenters included those whose work was featured in a National Report on Wellbeing in the Curriculum (Byrne & Surdey, 2021), while invited panellists included the Dean of Students from Ireland's largest university, the author of the National Student Success Report (O'Farrell, 2019), and Healthy Campus experts. The target audience was anyone interested in student wellbeing in Higher Education, namely educators and student support staff, service providers, policy makers, industry representatives, and students. The event was communicated to potentially interested participants through the National Forum, the Insight SFI Research Centre for Data Analytics, the Technological Higher Education Authority, the Irish Universities Association, and personal networks via a variety of mediums including websites, mailing lists, and social media. Details of the event can be found here. Data were collected in the form of registration information, text contributions in the Zoom chat, text responses to an anonymous question on Mentimeter (*Thinking about the barriers, what is needed to be able to embed wellbeing in the curriculum?*), and oral contributions from the presenters, panel, and open discussion. The oral contributions were transcribed as live closed captions during the event, and text contributions were integrated in a single text file for thematic analysis.

An initial review of the data by the team noted recurring sentiments appearing through the different data streams that pointed towards a previous conceptual framework employed by the team around systems thinking in HE. A deductive thematic analysis approach was then discussed and applied to the data, the guiding concept for which was "*an institution as a system that is supportive of wellbeing*". Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-step process described by Braun & Clarke (2006). The lead author familiarised herself with the data by rewatching the recording of the event, re-reading the contributions and organising the content in the process of writing the event report. She completed initial coding of the data through a latent approach with respect to concepts underpinning an institution as a system. Codes were noted in the text column and refined in two rounds. Initial theme development began by grouping codes and the underlying data based on larger patterns using Excel sheets, and themes were discarded, split, and combined during development. Understanding the potential for bias given that we, the authors, were the organisers of the event with a shared perspective on the importance of wellbeing in HE and how this should be enabled, we held a meeting to discuss the analysis and associated theoretical frameworks while remaining cognisant of these biases. Follow-up reviews and challenges of themes through collaborative documents were undertaken over a period of two weeks. During theme refinement and naming, the data were revisited to ensure that they reflected the contributions. These processes ensured the trustworthiness of the analysis process.

### 3. Results

Over 100 people registered for the event and there were over 60 attendees on the day, including students and student representatives, HE management, academics, registry staff, researchers, career advisers, student health and counselling providers, student engagement, health promotion, healthy campus and sport representatives, and charities and business development professionals, among others, from across the island of Ireland. Five themes were created from the data analysis, presented here.

#### 3.1. Shared values as the compass for organisational wellbeing culture

An institutional promise to wellbeing as core to the purpose of HE (and their purpose as an organisation) can frame the narrative for interdisciplinary discussions and facilitate decision making and action that reflect that promise. A shared understanding of wellbeing and the institution and staff's role in it (through a strategy, for example) can be a foundation upon which to build collaboration between and across departments and services and engender both collective and personal responsibility. A recognition of wellbeing as skills—which are lifelong and required graduate attributes—suggests that they should be consciously developed through education, formally and informally. Changing the organisational culture in alignment to a wellbeing strategy was considered to be a core, and challenging, requirement, reflected in the comments below by three different participants.

*“Learning and wellbeing are inextricably linked. When students are well they can better engage in their learning, reach their full potential and flourish”*

*“Whatever you consider the role of higher education to be, it presupposes a foundation on which students are well and functioning effectively”*

*“What is our understanding of wellbeing? What is senior management's understanding of wellbeing? A lot of times it can [seem] very individualised [to] me. Maybe that's [us] not wanting to take [the] responsibility that we have and the power that we have to improve and support and enable wellbeing”*

#### 3.2. Decision-makers as key enablers of change

Leadership (President's, Vice-President's, or equivalent) are seen to set the tone for buy-in and change through their actions, such as through the targets they set for their institution or department, and the way that they resource and communicate those goals. Senior management are seen to enable change and action on strategic decisions through endorsing, resourcing (money, time, support) and reward or recognition. For these reasons, having a ‘champion’ for an initiative who was in a position of influence was proposed as a facilitator of progress in a number of the case studies presented, in addition to providing credibility to encourage wider participation and collaboration.

*“Presidents’ get [people] interested”*

*“And we have support, most importantly, from senior management, including the President of [x], who've all endorsed it and supported it and say, yes, we should be doing this and [who] give us whatever help that they can”*

#### 3.3. Academic structures as a vehicle to both facilitate positive wellbeing and mitigate negative impacts

Assessing the way curricular programmes are structured and assessed, as well as their content, was proposed to enable subtle changes which could support wellbeing. These included scaffolding progressive learning journeys, reducing class sizes to facilitate personal relationships both between students and between students and staff, allocation of class places to support diversity and inclusion, and moving toward future-thinking teaching frameworks that better meet graduate skills and ways of working. Academic staff were seen as a key vehicle to action changes to these structures.

*“I do think we need to look at not just the taught elements, I know it's important, but also how we deliver education and are we thinking about wellbeing in a way in which our courses are actually physically structured as well as the content.”*

*“To what extent could or should these initiatives be accompanied by a critical appraisal of the ways in which our programmes, and our institutions more generally, might be detracting from student wellbeing?”*

#### 3.4. Academic staff as the embodiment of the institution and its values

As opposed to staff in professional and support service roles who may only meet students in specific contexts and times of need, academic staff were considered to “have the eyes and ears” of all students. As such, they represent an opportunity to decentralise wellbeing away from purpose-built services and into the mainstream academic experience—embodying the agreed shared values of the institution. These staff need to be well themselves in order to teach and support students and need

resources to experiment with and develop their teaching practices. Whilst staff wellbeing initiatives can have a positive impact, and staff were shown to personally benefit from teaching wellbeing, unmanageable workloads were seen as a significant barrier to role modelling wellbeing.

*“The main drivers of the learning are the teachers. And notwithstanding these early comments about the expected demands on the teaching staff at the third level institution, I believe that where we want to get to around wellbeing can't happen without the collaboration of the staff...[the] wellbeing agenda can only happen properly if it's infused and embedded in some way into the expectation of the various schools and academic centres”*

*“If we have institutions that demonstrably [are] set up in such a way that [they] care holistically for every member of the community... and that things like staff burnout, and staff mental health are being looked at and catered for, then we might find ourselves in the position where we also organically... have individuals who are placed in front of students who they themselves have been through journey of understanding how to take care of their own health, their own wellbeing, and maybe imparting same to the group [of students] in front of them.”*

### **3.5. The student voice as a guide for informed decision making**

Ensuring that decisions and actions on wellbeing are informed by the student voice was a recurring theme during the event and was considered an essential but challenging requirement. In addition to managing individual preferences around curricular content and how it is delivered (including balancing practicality and relevance), barriers to understanding and evaluating the student experience and the impact of initiatives were discussed. These included the burden on students in research participation and the fatigue of being requested to fill out multiple surveys from different sources, in addition to the challenge of demonstrating the value of initiatives that may have a longer-term impact. Facilitators included partnerships with student representatives and making better use of local and national data collection initiatives. Students themselves spoke of needing spaces in which to grow and develop skills around wellbeing and being able to apply their learnings in a way that is meaningful to them and their programme of study and future career.

*“We are expected to automatically know how to manage ourselves, our emotions, how to become independent learners almost overnight... People sometimes say these life skills are common sense, but I would argue against that notion. They need to be taught and are possibly more important than the other things we devote our time to in colleges. We are told our twenties are our time to get to know ourselves, but we don't have the spaces to do that”*

*“While I was already interested and knew some stuff about wellbeing and healthy living, I never really consciously put my time and energy towards it, so now that it was part of the curriculum, it was worth credits towards my degree, it became a lot more accessible for me, and I became a lot more invested and interested in developing myself in a more applied way... I liked how we were able to take different parts of the curriculum that were of interest to us and apply them in a practical way towards our own lives”*

## **4. Discussion**

The findings of this event could be described as the requirements for, facilitators of, or characteristics of an institution as a system that supports wellbeing, and as such, they illuminate some of the potential reasons why the implementation of holistic approaches have not often been realised. A lack of shared values or a shared understanding of wellbeing and the institution's responsibility to it is demonstrated in the recent strategy of the governmental department responsible for Higher Education in Ireland, in which student wellbeing hardly features (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021). And while those in institutional leadership positions have been identified as key enablers of change, their decisions are often shaped by wider political and contextual climates, including with respect to funding and the key performance indicators to which that funding is linked.

Whilst curricular approaches to embedding wellbeing as an area of learning have been recommended as an approach to mainstream wellbeing in HE, and to demand resourcing and engagement, they have equally been criticised in secondary education for reducing wellbeing to quantifiable hours taught, instead of as a guiding principle for how staff and students are treated (Farrell & Mahon, 2022). These wider systems principles were evident in the recognition of how programme and institutional structures can be vehicles to both facilitate positive wellbeing and detract from it, and also in the importance of supporting staff wellbeing, as their words and actions are seen by students as the face and voice of the institution and its values. Wellbeing as an examinable and credit-bearing subject also brings up tensions where academic structures can have a negative impact on wellbeing, in addition to isolated syllabi being viewed as non-essential 'soft' content that is not relevant to a discipline or programme of

study. These perceptions of relevance could be considered to be culture driven, where having shared values around the purpose of HE and what an institution seeks to be could serve to strengthen perceptions of the value of wellbeing initiatives.

Students' experiences of the modules reported during the event were critical perspectives to represent, however, our capacity to understand, evaluate and action their perspectives is currently limited by access, know-how, and resources. Future-proofing solutions to these needs with respect to any new strategies for wellbeing should be positioned in the context of the digital world students increasingly inhabit, and the digital transformation approaching institutions.

Whilst many frameworks for student health and wellbeing are aligning in terms of needs and strategies, realistic implementation plans which are conscious of micro political climates, limiting factors of funding and workload, and traditions of siloed working in HE are required to tackle complex organisational change from a systems perspective. As such, many of the national HE frameworks, such as those for mental health and suicide prevention, health promoting campuses, student success, and student partnership, may benefit from integration through a HE sector lens, including through linking KPIs and associated funding.

Actioning organisational and culture change requires individuals working toward a shared vision, benefitting from the merging of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. Whilst capacity for fundamental change has been demonstrated through the Covid-19 pandemic, community momentum now requires HE to outline its values with respect to responsibility for student wellbeing whereby actions can follow, as the purpose of a system is judged not on how it is described but on how it acts (Meadows, 2008).

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