

Curricular approaches to supporting student academic success and wellbeing.

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Abstract

Using the framework of Self-determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and building on institutional and national initiatives (e.g., Baik et al., 2017; Cranney, 2015; Field et al., 2014), individual course (unit/subject) convenors across the university are being supported to identify, evaluate and improve curricular (and co-curricular) approaches to support student success and wellbeing.

Background

The underlying premises for this work are that: (a) a positive framing of wellbeing supports the success of all students; (b) all students are required to engage with the curriculum, so the curriculum should be a primary platform to support student success, drawing on both evidence-based teaching frameworks and the science of student success and wellbeing (e.g., Baik et al., 2017); (c) with some professional development and support, course convenors are capable of implementing and evaluating strategies within their curriculum that support student success.

The primary enabler for this emerging initiative is a centrally supported project within an institution-wide student wellbeing community of practice, led by education-focused academics. Here we describe Phase 1 of this project (second half of 2020). There are three overall AIMS of this project: (1) increase student success and wellbeing; (2) provide a model for course convenors to evaluate *any* curricular innovation; and (3) provide support for course convenors to write up case studies for professional development purposes.

Method

Ethics approval for evaluation research allows (a) course convenors to choose up to four statements to describe strategies they had identified and/or developed that theoretically should support students' psychological needs of competence, relatedness or autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; e.g., "I would recommend the continued use of the strategy of in-class self-management activities including academic goal setting and reflecting on feedback" [competence]), and (b) a set of common statements regarding whether the course as a whole supported students' needs (e.g., "I was able to form positive professional relationships with other students in this course" [relatedness]). Toward the end of the term/semester, students were invited to complete a wellbeing survey that included the course-specific statements, whereby students rated the extent of their agreement. In Phase 1, three courses were evaluated: a core course for medical students at a regional campus, a core course for medical students at the main metropolitan campus, and a large first-year biology course (open to all students) at the main campus. During Phase 1, given pandemic-related restrictions, strategies often focused on (a) maintaining students' sense of relatedness, given that most courses were being run online, and (b)

integrating extra resources to support the development of both discipline-specific skills (e.g., online laboratory demonstrations) and generic skills (e.g., maintaining motivation in the midst of the isolating experience of online delivery; see “Practical Example” videos at <https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/HealthyUni>).

Results and Discussion

Initial results suggest that across the three courses, there was general endorsement of the strategies. There was some variation in level of endorsement, which reflected the nature of the course, and importantly served to inform design of the next course delivery, particularly as conditions change with the pandemic consequences. All Phase 1 participants have reported on the findings of their case study in some form (e.g., meetings/conferences within and beyond the institution; applications for promotion/awards). For Phase 2 (first half of 2021), up to ten courses are being evaluated across three campuses and six Schools. Funding for Phase 3 (second half of 2021) is currently being sought. Both the student evaluation data and the informal feedback from convenors suggest that the three aims of this project are being met. Importantly, the collaborative processes of learning from each others’ practice and determining course specific evaluation statements appear to have increased convenors’ confidence in both the value of their current practice and the capacity to improve, evaluate, and publicly present that practice. In summary, this project constitutes an innovative, ground-up application of theory to practice, that benefits both students and course convenors, and can be applied to multiple forms of curricular innovation development and evaluation.

Questions

1. Do you have any questions about this initiative?
2. Do you think there is value in adapting this approach at your institution? If so, what do you see as the enablers, barriers and possible solutions?
3. If not, what are the viable alternatives to improving support for student (and course convenor) success and wellbeing into the future?
4. Would such initiatives be better supported at a university-wide level, and if so, how?

References

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