

# Ensuring Student Mental Wellbeing whilst introducing Block Mode Intensive Learning and Teaching

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## Abstract

As De Montfort University, a UK-based University, introduced block delivery across the undergraduate portfolio the University sought to maintain a continued focus on, and commitment to, an institution-wide approach to embedding mental wellbeing. With mental wellbeing relevant to the whole university community and recognising the power of transformational change to impact wellbeing, the university cross-examined student feedback to understand and ensure mental wellbeing.

An intensive block model was introduced at De Montfort University (DMU) from the start of the academic session 2022-23. Undergraduate student experiences and learning from the initial months, focused on those in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media, are presented alongside an examination of the methods and impact of embedding mental wellbeing in this new intensive mode; ensuring the continued institutional approach to embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum, providing inclusive support for all learners. The learning and impact identified from initial experiences indicate areas of strength and areas for development, enhancement and growth. This article presents educational practice implications for other providers exploring and implementing block delivery in intensive learning and teaching modes.

The University's HealthyDMU philosophy recognises mental wellbeing is relevant to all, informed by a social model of wellbeing, in which a student's experience of mental wellbeing is directly related to their environment and experiences, based on the five ways to wellbeing (Aked, Marks, Cordon & Thompson, 2008). Embedding this throughout the curriculum reduces wellbeing barriers to facilitate student success, establishing pro-active approaches to mental wellbeing and a health promoting environment.

This article provides a unique focus on student experience from the position of mental wellbeing embedded in curriculum design and delivery. This paper presents an exploration of student responses to the introduction of intensive delivery at undergraduate level within a UK university, positioned around support for mental wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Block model, student wellbeing, intensive learning and teaching

## Introduction

De Montfort University (DMU), primarily based in Leicester in the United Kingdom, with campuses and partners globally, has developed an innovative approach to preparing for and embracing curriculum re-design. Academic programmes across the four DMU Faculties of i) Arts, Design and Humanities, ii) Business and Law, iii) Computing, Engineering and Media, and iv) Health and Life Sciences, are incrementally involved in the change, starting with first year (level 4), extending each academic session to subsequent levels across undergraduate programmes, with postgraduate programmes embracing the change a year after it commences at the undergraduate level. The transformational change, implemented from the start of the 2022-23 academic session, transitions delivery of academic programmes to an intensive block model approach, a model that enables students to focus on studying one module at a time.

Whilst ensuring development and delivery of a high-quality student experience in this new model the University wants to ensure a continued focus on, and commitment to, an institution-wide approach to embedding mental wellbeing. The University's HealthyDMU philosophy, is a university-wide approach to student health and wellbeing, establishing DMU as a health promoting university, through a philosophy that recognises mental wellbeing as relevant to all members of the university community (Hughes and Spanner, 2019). The HealthyDMU philosophy is informed by a social model of wellbeing, where a student's experience of mental wellbeing is directly related to their environment and experiences. It aims to reduce wellbeing barriers to student success through establishing pro-active approaches to mental wellbeing. All staff are encouraged to consider how they contribute to establishing a health promoting environment. This philosophy is based on the five ways to wellbeing; i) connect, ii) be active, iii) take notice, iv) keep learning, and v) give, (Aked, Marks, Cordon & Thompson, 2008). In this whole university approach, DMU provides extensive training to staff to embed this philosophy through the curriculum in order to reduce student health and wellbeing inequalities, reduce barriers to wellbeing, facilitate student success, establish proactive approaches to mental wellbeing and skills development, through creating a health promoting environment (Moriarty & Scarffe, 2019).

Throughout this extensive transformational change activity, the University must regularly examine and ensure the continual focus on the HealthyDMU philosophy throughout the curriculum. Jones (2022) noted that periods of significant change "inevitably bring about anxieties", and with the introduction of the block delivery model, the need to ensure embedding mental wellbeing at DMU is paramount, as the University reflects upon itself and asks 'How does a UK-based Higher Education provider ensure a continued focus on its institution-wide approach to Embedding Mental Wellbeing during a period of curriculum transformation?'

### Scope and purpose of the study

In support of every individual student achieving their learning goals, from September 2022 undergraduate programmes across the University transitioned to block delivery. This study focusses on one of the four DMU faculties. The Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media at the DMU Leicester campus is home to approximately 5,500 students and manages 51 programmes. Learning from the experience of students and staff from across the range of disciplinary areas within Computing, Engineering and Media during the implementation of this intensive study mode will support enhancements for future study blocks and future academic

years. The learning and impact identified from those initial experiences would indicate areas of strength and areas for development, enhancement and growth.

The purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which student mental wellbeing has continued to be an effective focus of activity within the University as it transitions to block delivery. This paper presents the methods used at DMU for capturing student feedback on mental wellbeing during introduction of block mode delivery and reflects on that feedback from the context of one of the University's four Faculties, the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media, and the learning points to further support future introduction of block delivery across the remaining programme levels. As the University increasingly delivers more modules in block mode as the new model is rolled out across the levels of academic study over a three-four year period the need to continually focus on the availability of, and accessibility and engagement with, student mental wellbeing support is critical to ensure the University is maintaining a health promoting environment.

The next section describes initiatives established to ensure continuation of DMU's focus on student mental wellbeing, and to enhance their mental wellbeing during the introduction of block mode intensive learning and teaching. Research methodology and data collection methods are outlined, followed by a presentation of results and discussion aligned with the University's HealthyDMU philosophy and approach to embedding mental wellbeing.

## **Background and Literature Review**

### **Planning and curriculum validation informing Block mode delivery**

Recognising the 'radical change' concept of institution-wide change (McCluskey et al., 2019), and concepts of intensive delivery in development globally (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021; Kwan et al. 2022), Education 2030 is DMU's overarching vision to review and enhance curriculum methodologies. Education 2030 introduces block delivery across undergraduate and postgraduate provision, enabling students to study one module, or block, at a time in sequential order. The rationale for the transition to block delivery responds to student feedback, with an aim to enhance the student experience by offering a curriculum designed on preferred learning approaches and engagement styles. Reflecting on quantitative and qualitative data, student outcomes and graduate destinations, and feedback from stakeholders including employers, DMU grasped this as an opportunity to review the whole offer to provide a refreshed curriculum offer and delivery approach.

At DMU, blocks are seven weeks in duration, shorter than the University's previous study periods of 11-24 weeks. Each block equates to 30 credits. Undergraduate students study four blocks in a year, to accumulate 120 credits in one level of study. Modules of 30 credits consist of 300 notional learning hours (following UK-based academic quality guidance), with a minimum of 20% of the learning hours scheduled as teaching activity, equating to approximately 60 hours as a minimum of taught delivery over a seven week block, approximately 9-10 hours per week. Although taught sessions are typically 2-3 hours in duration, with timetabled breaks between, a standardised approach to delivery was not appropriate. The exact delivery pattern and combination of learning hours is dependent on the nature of the subject. A Graphic Design level 4 module may have 6 hours of lectures accompanied by 42 hours of tutorials and 42 hours of studio/lab guided development time, whilst a Computer Science level 4 module may consist of 42 hours of workshops plus 24 hours

of seminars. During curriculum planning educational developers supported the review of existing approaches to teaching and explored how best to teach, and ensure learning, in this intensive delivery approach.

As de Main and Jones (2022) highlighted, many programme re-designs embrace sprint methodologies and iterative variations upon this methodology to define new pedagogical approaches. The sprint methodology is an approach for solving problems in a facilitated, time-controlled environment, bringing stakeholders together to align ideas against shared visions and agreed goals. To design, develop and deliver Education 2030, the University embraced sprint for curriculum development, facilitating curriculum re-design from concept to validation of approved academic programmes in an intensive time-frame of as little as three months.

Validation is a rigorous academic quality assurance process, ensuring proposed programmes contain modules of appropriate disciplinary content at the relevant academic levels for the programme's intended award aim, as well as ensuring a high-quality student experience, facilitating the development of employability skills, and aligning to other regulatory or accreditation requirements. In the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media, home to around 5,500 students at the Leicester campus, 51 programmes were validated in a fourteen month period; programmes were validated concurrently within three months, with those requiring more liaison with external accrediting bodies expanding the time-frame from three to fourteen months. Unique approaches were required for each programme, recognising the varied nature of delivery and engagement across the faculty's wide range of taught subjects.

Key to the success of these validations was the engagement of stakeholders throughout the curriculum redesign process. Experts from across the University, including the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team, graduate employers and industry contacts supported academic teams to understand current, emerging and future market places that graduates from these programmes would likely enter. Teams of experts within the University supporting other University-wide initiatives including decolonising the curriculum, and embedding sustainability aligned to the University's commitment to the development of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, provided examples and worked with academic teams to explore opportunities for curriculum alignment with these important areas of focus. Aked et al.'s (2008) five ways to wellbeing underpinned many discussions between experts and academic teams, with the concepts of connection, being active and learning, particularly relevant when considering how to embed university-wide initiatives. Skills development and careers teams supported the development of curriculum planning and sequencing, and explored opportunities for activity embedded within and aligned to the taught curriculum. External examiners discussed current pedagogic developments across the Higher Education sector, reviewing and critiquing plans as they developed. Students were a key stakeholder, providing feedback on their own personal experiences, that of peers at other universities, and also of their hopes, dreams and aspirations for programmes of study in the future.

### **Education 2030 block mode delivery**

In DMU's block model approach a whole module is taught and assessed within a block, with a small number of exceptions where there are external professional regulatory requirements for an alternative approach.

Students embrace learning activities throughout the block, often experiencing team teaching approaches that enable academic teams to co-deliver core academic content relevant to the block. Students may engage in formative and summative assessment activities dependent on the discipline, with the majority of summative assessment occurring in the latter weeks of the block.

Following the conclusion of each block students progress onto the next block within that level of study. The marked and moderated assessment outcomes from the block studied are reviewed and ratified by a Module Assessment Board, and students receive their ratified outcomes whilst engaging in the next block. Should a student have failed the preceding block they become eligible for reassessment. To support the introduction of block delivery the University revisited and reworked a number of its regulations, and added an in-year reassessment opportunity to enable students to participate in reassessment whilst actively engaged in studying the next block. Where a student participates in in-year reassessment, a short reassessment period enables the marked and moderated outcomes to be considered at the following Module Assessment Board.

### **A whole university approach to mental wellbeing**

The term 'mental wellbeing' is often used in educational contexts rather than 'mental health'. Houghton and Anderson (2017, p.44) contrast the terms as “mental wellbeing, which we all have, and a mental health problem which only some of us would identify as experiencing”. We all experience changes in wellbeing, whilst some may be “living with a diagnosed mental illness” (Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Working Group, 2015, p.56). Department of Health (2014), notes that the term ‘wellbeing’ has been criticised for being “intangible, difficult to define and even harder to measure” (p.36), an area that remains under discussion by researchers seeking to provide a clearer definition.

Like many universities, DMU has recorded a continuing rise in the number of students with a declared disability and the number in receipt of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). In 2019-20, 17% of DMU students (1,979) declared a disability on entry and received DSA; the majority of these (1,011) associated with mental health.

Tinto (2008) recognises “access without effective support is not opportunity”. To ensure and enhance the students’ experience, DMU provides a range of projects encouraging all students to stay well. These projects support student mental health and wellbeing by increasing student awareness of and access to support for a range of wellbeing matters. The University’s HealthyDMU philosophy is supported by an online hub of the same name (Healthy DMU Hub, available at: <https://www.dmu.ac.uk/healthy/>), a suite of publicly accessible webpages that act as a single portal to the whole university approach to support student health and wellbeing. Embedding mental wellbeing at DMU pre-dates the introduction of Education 2030. The University regularly reviews and evaluates its approaches to embedding mental wellbeing and HealthyDMU, in support of the whole student population. The efficacy of approaches were reviewed and enhanced in response to COVID-19, paving the way for work required with the introduction of block delivery in Education 2030.

### **Challenges of embedding mental wellbeing in block delivery**

It is widely accepted within the UK higher education sector that many students will start their higher education experience without having previously received a disability diagnosis, and/or without disclosing this to their provider (Eccles et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Those students who do seek disability assessment can face lengthy processes to participate in and receive outcomes of assessments (Williams et al., 2019). Recognising this and acknowledging that in Education 2030 students will study, be assessed and complete their first full block within just seven weeks, the HealthyDMU philosophy and approach to embedding mental wellbeing within the curriculum is critical.

The Healthy Universities network in the UK promotes the concepts of learning in environments and within cultures that “enhance health, wellbeing and sustainability” (University of Central Lancashire, n.d.), which closely aligns with De Montfort’s aim to ensure that all students have access to a curriculum that is health promoting. DMU endeavours to embed mental wellbeing activity within the curriculum to enable students to maintain mental wellness and thrive in their activity. It supports its staff to do this through three of the four core strands of activity related to HealthyDMU, training and development, with the first strand primarily a student-facing support initiative that provides staff with reassurance of a university-wide approach, a source to directly signpost students towards.

The core strands underpinning DMU's embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum include:

1. HealthyDMU Hub - the University’s student-facing online hub that supports health and wellbeing;
2. HealthyDMU Staff Toolkit - aligned to the student-facing hub, this toolkit provides staff with guidance and resources to effectively embed mental wellbeing in academic content;
3. Welfare Training - part of the whole University staff training offer, this includes sessions around professional boundaries and supporting students with mental health matters;
4. Academic Training and Development - an area within the broad suite of academic development opportunities is a focus on the academic teacher training offer with embedding mental wellbeing through emotionally intelligent teaching (Mortiboys, 2012) and the expansion of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to include social, emotional and compassionate communities (Meyer, et al., 2014).

For students who may require additional support due to ongoing or changing needs there are additional extra-curricular opportunities including HealthyDMU masterclasses, peer networks, appointments with trained counsellors, DSA assessments, and for those with diagnosed conditions and/or those perceived to be ‘at risk’ there are specialist appointments, risk policies and procedures, support from the wider University community and local/national universities.

As students engage in one module at a time in block mode delivery, it is critical that mental wellbeing is considered during curriculum development, and appropriate resources used and signposting providing at time-relevant points in the block learning journey. Long and McLaren (2024) examined mental wellbeing in relation to student belonging in remote intensive delivery

and recognised that the online learning environment can impact mental health, therefore attention is required in the design of these learning experiences. The impact of a shorter delivery model compared to a longer traditional delivery model was explored by Nieuwoudt (2023), who identified that students participating in the shorter delivery model experienced reduced psychological distress and improved academic performance, suggesting that this particular shorter delivery model may support student performance and mental wellbeing. Considering Aked et al.'s (2008) five ways of wellbeing, block delivery presents challenges in providing opportunities for students to connect, for example, at the start of a programme of study or module, as they are required to engage with curriculum content at a faster pace alongside new peers, where previously there was more time for team-building and initial networking prior to getting into curriculum content.

### **Online support for students and staff**

The HealthyDMU online hub acts as a single portal to a whole university approach to support student health and wellbeing, and is directly accessed by students via publicly available webpages within the University's main website. The need to maintain an effective online presence for the provision of student wellbeing guidance and support was a key learning point from activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, and an area that it was critical to ensure was maintained as the university embraced block delivery. The existing online hub that supports health and wellbeing (Parkin & Brown, 2020) is therefore the natural place to continue to centre student-facing materials, supporting accessibility by providing a platform that is open to all, at all times of the day and irrespective of location. The existing hub is regularly reviewed to ensure relevance to evolving external factors as well as respond to the changing ways in which students are engaging with their studies. Although not embedded in the curriculum, this space ensures mental wellbeing materials are easily accessible to all students and staff.

Designed to complement the student-facing HealthyDMU hub is the HealthyDMU Staff Toolkit, providing staff with additional detail and information to facilitate support for health and wellbeing matters raised by students or anticipated based on previous experiences. The Toolkit provides downloadable tutor resources to empower academics to deliver embedded mental wellbeing aligned to academic content and assessment requirements within the curriculum. This facilitates delivery of appropriate messaging by the academic staff tutor at the perceived point-of-need. Academic staff are able to identify where mental wellbeing materials would be best utilised and bring these into the curriculum through using and adapting the Toolkit resources as appropriate to the disciplinary context. Aligned to Salmon and Wright's Carpe Diem concepts (2014), facilitated development sessions for academic staff include the creation of material for immediate use with classes. This responds directly to challenges posed by Education 2030, supporting academic staff to embed mental wellbeing content within their curriculum material whilst recognising the challenges introduced by block delivery, the need to deliver content in a condensed timeframe. The provision of the Toolkit therefore enables academic colleagues to quickly create relevant, expert informed, high-quality, mental wellbeing content that can be adapted to be relevant to the disciplinary context in which it is being delivered.

The dual initiatives of the student-facing HealthyDMU hub and the staff-facing HealthyDMU Staff Toolkit ensure that the HealthyDMU philosophy is applied and maintained. Students access relevant messages and resources at time-relevant points within their studies, noting the

reduced timeframe in which students meet their first module assessments, and are encouraged to independently engage with the HealthyDMU hub as relevant to their needs.

### **Staff training and development**

Ensuring academic awareness of the role of experiences and environments in mental wellbeing is based upon Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the foundation for learning approaches at DMU. Through this approach DMU aims to provide an equal learning experience for every student, ensuring individualised learning experiences, with personalised teaching and learning support (Meyer et al., 2014). These foundations are critical to Education 2030 and to embedding mental wellbeing, as both seek to enhance each individual students' experience.

An internally developed suite of bespoke training and development workshops support staff to embed mental wellbeing, from both a welfare and student support angle, as well as an academic and pedagogic development approach. Welfare training is designed and available for the whole university community, ensuring consistency of message and support approaches (Barden and Caleb, 2019); the offer includes development workshops focused on 'Professional Boundaries' and 'Supporting students with Mental Health'. By ensuring that all staff across the University community have access to and are engaging with aligned messaging in support of student mental health, the University can be assured that the transition to block delivery is supported in a comprehensive and connected way across the whole university. Additionally, the creation of an asynchronous micro-learning resource focused on 'Emotionally Intelligent Teaching', invites academics to consider the impact of their teaching on mental wellbeing through reflecting on emotional intelligence in personal practice. Emotionally intelligent teaching recognises the importance of feelings in response to learning situations, and considers how best to manage these to support engagement with, and success, in learning. In 2012, Mortiboys recognised "as teachers we should develop and employ emotional intelligence to complement the subject expertise and pedagogical skills that we already offer to learners" (p. 3).

Embedding mental wellbeing content is itself embedded within the 'Effective Learning and Teaching' session for all academic staff new to the university, or new to teaching. Academic staff who have little or limited teaching experience are required to engage in this session, making it the opportune workshop in which to include mental wellbeing content. The UDL approach includes a focus on mental wellbeing through embedded concepts in workshops, and for those who wish to explore UDL principles further there are a range of online development materials around the social, emotional and compassionate community's aspects of UDL.

Regular participant reviews and stakeholder evaluations inform enhancements of the suite of staff training and development available, and are vital throughout periods of transformational change. Academic staff have been supported throughout the process of introducing Education 2030, from curriculum planning and validation activities, through to peer support as programmes commenced block delivery.

### **Method**

To facilitate the University's understanding of student responses to the introduction of the block model, a suite of measures were implemented to monitor student experience for review and enhancement purposes. Existing student voice opportunities were re-designed to provide more timely engagements in the new intensive study approach, and a new Pulse Survey developed.



## **Pulse Survey**

Focused explicitly on the introduction of block delivery an online Pulse Survey was designed and introduced, inviting student engagement in the third and fourth teaching weeks of the initial study block (Appendix 1). This early feedback point was designed to provide an overview of responses to block delivery, inviting qualitative comments if students wanted to expand upon quantitative feedback, supporting the University to enhance practice ahead of subsequent blocks.

The team ensuring mental wellbeing is embedded across the university were involved in the development of the Pulse Survey, a new survey piloted to explore student perceptions associated with the early stages of block delivery. Questions that examined areas including the induction and transition into the University recognised the opportunities and potential challenges this experience presents, impacting upon mental wellbeing, concepts recognised and explored by O'Shea (2016) and Worsley et al. (2021).

Male et al. (2016) conducted a study leading to a good practice guide, citing the benefits of intensive delivery models and recognising that this includes learning communities, immersion and interaction, and increased communication between the academic and student. When developing the Education 2030 framework and block delivery approach the argument that studying one module at a time would be beneficial to students, supporting their ability to engage in activity beyond their studies, including caring and employment activity was accepted. As such, alongside belonging, connectedness is another factor in student mental wellbeing as students commence University study. The Pulse Survey explored this through two different lenses, asking about the connections made with other student on the same programme of study, and the level of interaction with teaching staff. These areas all impact on mental wellbeing and engagement.

## **Student Voice Committees**

Peer elected student representatives (trained by the Students' Union to represent their peers), participate in regular formalised Student Voice Committees, where representatives raise items pertinent to the cohort. Prompts for discussion at these Committees include modules studied, availability of resources, physical learning spaces, online learning materials available via the Virtual Learning environment (VLE), and other student experience matters. These Committees occur in discrete programme or subject clusters, and the recorded action logs (Student Voice Log) presented and discussed through subject level Management Boards, allowing for thematic exploration of matters raised and collective actions to be agreed.

The Management Boards are attended by academic staff from the programme and subject area. Student Voice Committees meet two-three times a year, with matters raised recorded on a Student Voice Log that allows for actions to be directly assigned to individuals, facilitating the review of updates against actions at these meetings. Student representatives that attend Management Boards are encouraged to update their peers on progress against actions.

This Student Voice Log is updated throughout the year to reflect emerging matters from the student voice, and to record the outcomes of previously raised items. The Student Voice Committee meetings are arranged by programme teams, some involving just peer elected student representatives, others (dependent on cohort size) inviting the wider student cohort to

participate. Notes are logged during the Committee meeting by the programme team or servicing officer, and are stored via an online file-sharing platform, making the Logs accessible to a range of stakeholders.

### **Module-based student feedback**

Within modules students are invited to participate in feedback opportunities directly with the academic team. The methods used vary depending upon the discipline, some engage in in-class discussions, others in short online surveys, but always with the view to collating the responses, identifying key themes and actions, and reporting back on these to the relevant student cohort. This feedback is also captured in Student Voice Committee action log to provide a holistic overview of student feedback received throughout the academic session.

### **Embedding Mental Wellbeing team feedback**

The Embedding Mental Wellbeing team are a team of experts from across the university. Led by the author, an academic research project leader from within the Faculty, the team includes the university's leaders of academic development and enhancement, staff welfare training and development, and relevant teams from a professional services and support background, with experience of working in mental health roles in the public sector. Operating in separate areas within the university, each had its own mechanism for gathering student and staff feedback about mental wellbeing matters. The team met regularly to review feedback gathered through end-of-session feedback forms, discussions with stakeholders, comments received via email, and requests for further input and support from academic colleagues. In addition, the team had access to data from the Pulse Survey, Student Voice Committee action logs, and module-based student feedback, allowing for the triangulation of sources for holistic understanding.

### **Data analysis from multiple sources**

Analysing student feedback received via different mechanisms provides opportunity for triangulation of information, cross-examining student representative feedback through formalised committees (Student Voice Committees), in-class/module reflection (Module Level Feedback) and online survey responses (Pulse Survey).

The author, the leader of the Embedding Mental Wellbeing project team, ensured that Student Voice Logs and Module Feedback were reviewed through key-word searches related to mental wellbeing, including mental wellbeing, belonging, transition, support, understanding, and more generally Education 2030, teaching, learning, and student experience. Relevant items were extracted and considered by the lead for Embedding Mental Wellbeing, for triangulation with other data sources. The project leader was also a member of the university's Education 2030 leadership groups, influencing methodologies for data collection and interrogating data analysis.

Pulse Survey data was collated and analysed by a central University team to ensure its statistical significance, before dissemination of quantitative summaries, supported by redacted qualitative comments (redacted to remove any personal identifiers). A central University team dedicated to student insight classified university-wide comments as positive or negative, and identified university-wide themes, before sharing the redacted themed comments (identified as positive or negative) across the university. The thematic groups were reviewed within Faculties to support enhancement activity in response, and by the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team who

identified elements of Aked et al.'s (2008) five ways of wellbeing, i) connect, ii) be active, iii) take notice, iv) keep learning, and v) give, within the themed comments. "Connect" was particularly evident through the Pulse Survey engagement theme, "being active" in the workload theme, and "taking notice" in themes around systems, processes, and logistics. The comments were categorised as positive or negative by the student insight team, supporting general understanding and initial response to the findings across the University, prior to review of the data relevant to the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media, by the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team.

Regular meetings of the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team considered recent engagement statistics and qualitative feedback from student and staff facing workshops. Reflecting on experiences from previous academic years, anticipated engagement in the current year of transition, and actual experience provided opportunity to wholistically review the experience across student support and academic development.

## Results

This section presents the results from the Pulse Survey that relate to student mental wellbeing. The Embedding Mental Wellbeing team reviewed thematic areas from associated qualitative research based on information from the Student Voice Committees and Module Feedback relevant to mental wellbeing. This facilitated understanding of student mental wellbeing during the introduction of block mode delivery.

### Pulse Survey

The Pulse Survey was responded to by 976 students across the University's four faculties; 320 students in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media responded to the survey. As transition to block delivery was occurring at level 4 only during the study period, 320 students represented 32% of the population.

Students' quantitative data was analysed using a net satisfaction methodology, where calculations were applied to represent the percentage of students who were very satisfied/satisfied with the overall matter, minus the percentage dissatisfied/very dissatisfied. The NET satisfaction readings are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

#### *Pulse Survey Results from the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media*

Extract of Pulse Survey Questions	Student responses
Enjoying focusing on one module at a time	94%
Focusing on one module suits my lifestyle / is good for my work-life balance	91%
Comfortable with the academic requirements of the course	90%
Satisfaction with the quality of the course	85%
Satisfaction with overall teaching and learning experience	82%
Level of interaction with teaching staff supports learning	79%
Feel supported in the transition to university study	78%
Induction process had worked well and helped with integration	70%
Made strong connections with other students on my course	63%

*Note.* This table presents a summary of the Pulse Survey responses from students in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Media, providing student responses to the introduction of block delivery facilitating greater exploration of the impact on student mental wellbeing.

Responses to the Pulse Survey were received from 320 of 1,000 students within the Faculty invited to participate. 90% of respondents felt ‘comfortable with the academic requirements of the course’, but it was elements of support and induction into the University that had not been as positively received (Table 1). Considering connectedness, 63% of the Faculty’s respondents recognised that they had ‘made strong connections with other students’ and 79% felt the ‘level of interaction with teaching staff’ was supporting their learning.

The large majority of the Faculty’s respondents, 94%, were ‘enjoying focusing on one module at a time’, whilst 91% recognised that focusing on one module suited their lifestyle and was ‘good for work-life balance’. In the qualitative comments, a student from within the Media School reflected that block teaching is:

Really the best way to learn, it provides easier focus and it doesn't make things stressful at all, following a focus line has made things less stressful on the first year and have more time for additional activities around DMU.

Exploring the qualitative feedback received it is important to note that this represents a small sub-sample, as of the 320 Faculty students who responded to the Survey only 17 provided free-text comments. The feedback focused on matters that the Faculty and University recognised as being items for raising in early experiences, including queries around timetabling and how to access specialist equipment and resources. The qualitative data indicated some student concerns where messaging had not been clearly articulated or processes understood, and some respondents explicitly commented on their perception of the impact of block delivery on their mental wellbeing, as above.

### **Student Voice Committees and module feedback**

On the theme of connectedness, in Journalism, a programme within the Media School, the Student Voice Committee noted feedback from student representatives to say that “the transition into uni. [had been] really smooth” and acknowledged “we’ve had great help from our lecturers and personal tutors”.

Echoing the Pulse Survey findings, the Media Production Student Voice Committee recorded academics and students engaging in positive discussions about areas of good practice and areas for improvement ahead of future block delivery, an element of “being active” from within the five ways to wellbeing (Aked et al., 2008). Similarly, the Computer Science and Software Engineering student representatives also used the Student Voice Committee to express student enjoyment in response to the block approach, especially the teaching methods utilised which were considered to be very inclusive and supportive of learning in the early University experience.

Aligned with Aked et al.’s (2008) themes to “take notice” and “keep learning”, through Student Voice Committees student representatives raised appreciation of the organisation of some virtual learning environments (VLE), recognising that the clear organisation and navigation approaches supported their learning and early ability to engage with the University and VLE environment. The Computer Science student representatives reported, “students appreciate the organisation of learning materials on the VLE, simplifying navigation for block delivery”, and Computer Games Programming representatives noted appreciation from their cohort for “the

recorded materials” and “pacing of the modules”, supporting individual learning approaches and benefiting wellbeing.

### **Embedding Mental Wellbeing team feedback**

The collaborative inter-disciplinary team across DMU working to develop and deliver the core strands of embedding mental wellbeing reflected on experiences of Education 2030 and the implementation of block delivery.

The HealthyDMU leader, noted “engagement is fantastic” since the introduction of block delivery, though it cannot be directly attributed to the introduction of block delivery as there has also been extensive activity to raise awareness around the philosophy across the University and to ensure HealthyDMU is embedded in DMU’s welcome and induction materials. The team regularly reviewed how best to reach and support students, exploring different platforms, communications methods, and operational approaches, including introducing a pilot for peer support networking in response to student feedback. The HealthyDMU leader further noted, “various university surveys show great awareness of HealthyDMU”, it is widely recognised and known by the student population, and “in 2021-22, HealthyDMU received over one-hundred thousand views”, in contrast to the 48,300 views achieved in the 2019-20 academic year. As the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team worked to raise awareness of the materials available to support students, this increase in the number of HealthyDMU views evidenced greater engagement, an increase in the number of students actively engaging with mental wellbeing materials developed and provided by the university. The HealthyDMU leader and other members of the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team worked extensively with academic staff to raise awareness of the support available to students, ensuring that as block delivery commenced in 2022, academic staff were using materials in, and signposting to HealthyDMU, within their taught sessions.

The university primarily uses the term programmes to recognise programmes of study, however, there are some legacy uses of the term course where this is considered easier for students to understand. One example within the university is Course Specific Initiatives, the term course here can be interchanged for programme, the principal focus being on initiatives to support student wellbeing within a programme (or course) of study. When the initiative was initially established, experts in mental wellbeing and student support would go into taught sessions following requests from academic staff, and these members of the central Course Specific Initiatives team would deliver supporting content, rather than the academics who teach the module. As the university embraced a greater focus on health promoting activity and embedding mental wellbeing the dynamic began to shift, with more academic colleagues co-delivering, or in some instances using the Toolkit to deliver support material themselves. When supporting academic staff to embed mental wellbeing resources within the curriculum it was noted that links with particular members of academic staff were vital. Where these were maintained annually the curriculum regularly featured appropriate mental wellbeing content, however, where these academic staff left or changed delivery patterns this impacted the extent to which mental wellbeing was supported through curriculum content. The Course Specific Initiatives leader, noted that where central teams offer to go into taught sessions and deliver mental wellbeing content alongside academic colleagues there was a notable pattern of requests initially around induction and early in the first study block, with content still largely being seen

as introductory rather than core to curriculum content. However, as the Course Specific Initiatives leader noted in a review discussion with the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team:

As the first year of block delivery progresses there are an increasing number of requests for in curriculum co-delivery in the third and fourth study blocks, potentially an indicator of academic reflection in response to student feedback in previous blocks.

This responsiveness to block delivery in-year was reflected on positively, with examples highlighted from Journalism where the Course Specific Initiative leader recognised “a Level 4 module on wellbeing in Journalism invites students to gather resources about wellbeing as part of the learning tasks, creating a collective set of examples to draw upon”.

As validation at the university is a rigorous academic quality assurance process, reviewing multiple aspects of planning for curriculum sequencing and high-quality student experience, the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team reflected on the reduced timescales for validation, and whether this had impacted the ability for academic programme teams to focus on embedding mental wellbeing content within the curriculum. The Academic Development and Training leader reflected that whilst their team had endeavoured to support and influence curriculum planning prior to validation, “the reduced timeframes afforded by sprint methodologies used in some areas has limited the ability to ensure stakeholders in all discussions who had a focus on learning design from an embedding mental wellbeing perspective”. Analysis of the student Pulse Survey responses noted no difference in impact on wellbeing in programmes where there had been less input from the Academic Development and Training team during curriculum planning prior to validation, this may be accounted for academic teams engaging with Academic Development and Training in the period between validation and the start of delivery.

The impact of block mode introduction is being regularly reviewed with academic input as it is for students, and work continues to develop materials and resources to support academic colleagues in their scaffolding and support approaches to empower students in their current study block and as they progress between blocks. Whilst evaluating their team’s reflections on the initial impact of block delivery, the Academic and Development Training leader recognised that “covering a module in seven weeks is intensive, therefore we’re offering more guidance on self-directed approaches, scaffolding within the curriculum structure and support framework, and how to prepare students for the next session or block”. This aligns with the holistic method to student support facilitated by the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team, responding to the University’s HealthyDMU philosophy, a range of approaches to support all members of the university community.

The Welfare training leader noted “lots of progress” related to increased visibility of the support available through presentation on different webpages. Through feedback gathered in sessions reflecting the central and bespoke session offer, staff were reporting feeling more equipped to respond to and manage student matters in block mode.

In advance of block delivery there had been consultation with academics about what sort of training and development they may need and when, and this intelligence facilitated careful planning of the training available to ensure it was as effective as possible for the staff community. The university provides a suite of mandatory training which academic and professional services staff are required to engage in, and when “comparing staff engagement

in 2022-23 with Welfare training with the same point in 2021-22, over 80 additional colleagues had engaged, which is good as this isn't mandatory training", the Welfare training leader reflected positively on this 10% increase in engagement on the previous academic year.

## Discussion

Having conducted Student Voice Committees to elicit feedback and the Pulse Survey so early into the introduction of block delivery, evidence-informed activity in response began in earnest to provide students with a better start for the next block, and shape ongoing developments for future intakes and inductions. Learning from the Pulse Survey facilitated enhancements to the second block, delivery of which commenced in the eighth week of teaching, and Student Voice Committees allowed for action by the tenth teaching week. Initial responses to the feedback included providing further materials and support aligned with induction activity, information about the availability of resources and specialist equipment (including mental wellbeing support). The Faculty recognised that whilst students were reflecting fairly positively on their satisfaction and the quality of experience (82% and 85% respectively), this was impacted by a desire to make stronger connections with peers and increase interactions with teaching staff. Sharing the data with academic teams allowed for some of the induction sessions to be revisited with students to enhance the experience. Student induction sessions included a focus on mental wellbeing and opportunities for peer networking as well as explaining teaching interactions. The reflection on initial responses, particularly the need for focused induction activity that supports students to make connections with other students on their programme and better articulation of the level of interaction with teaching staff (noting this varies by subject discipline) are important learning points for the sector. Whilst students felt that they had been supported in the transition to university study, there is room for induction activities to do more to support early student belonging in support of wellbeing.

In response to belonging and connectedness, Student Voice Committees recorded student feedback on the "really smooth" transition into university and praise for the help received from lecturers and personal tutors. Examining feedback from across the Faculty emerging through different feedback methods, this remains an ongoing area for exploration, the author plans to further explore potential variation in feedback to examine whether this can explicitly be linked to factors including discipline and pedagogic methods employed, further serving to support understanding of the embedding of mental wellbeing and support for students across the Faculty.

The early positive responses to the questions specifically about block delivery indicated that students valued focussing on one module at a time, recognising the benefits of this for their broader experience. The Student Voice Committee records indicated positive discussions about the experience and future of block delivery, with some students noting the perceived benefits for their mental wellbeing in their responses to the Pulse Survey. The results from the student voice activities were echoed across the University, the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team have reviewed the feedback to continue to develop the support around embedding of mental wellbeing, ensuring it is appropriate to the Education 2030 framework and supporting the transition to block delivery.

Feedback received via the Student Voice Committee about the organisation of the VLE to support student transition into the University was disseminated across the Faculty, recognising

that presentation of information has an impact on emotional response, aligned with concepts of emotionally intelligent teaching (Mortiboys, 2012), which academic staff can support through careful VLE planning. The sector should remain mindful of all learning environments and student engagement patterns, it is not just those in-person inductions and in-class events that support transition into university, and into the intensive block learning approach.

Reflections from those working to support the embedding of mental wellbeing have highlighted a desire to ensure future focus on mental wellbeing in curriculum content planning prior to validation. Many universities in the UK are working towards University Mental Health Charter Awards (Hughes & Spanner, 2019), feedback from experiences at DMU continue to contribute to sector discussions and understanding of embedding mental wellbeing in the curriculum, supporting development of these awards.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing review and evaluation of embedding mental wellbeing has supported the University's efforts to ensure the HealthyDMU philosophy is maintained during the period of transformational change involving the introduction of block delivery. Student responses in the early stages of the transformation indicate student satisfaction with their learning experience, an experience that supports a good work-life balance, which in turn facilitates and supports mental wellbeing.

The Embedding Mental Wellbeing team recognise that academic teams may wish to embed mental wellbeing materials at different times within their curriculum depending on what is being taught and based on their learning from previous experiences. By developing and providing mental wellbeing materials for use when needed, via the Toolkit, the University has ensured a range of materials are readily available for academic staff to use when needed. The Faculty recommends reviewing the availability of, and signposting to, staff development opportunities, encouraging academic staff to engage throughout the year as their teaching occurs, facilitating staff development at the most appropriate time for the individual.

In response to student feedback the Faculty has reviewed its induction and welcome activities, and enhanced the mental wellbeing elements contained within, to raise awareness of the availability of student support at the University. The Faculty is also extending the period in which welcome activities occur, by providing additional introductory and support events throughout the first year of study, enabling students to engage with mental wellbeing support at times more suited to individual need.

Increasing use is being made of the HealthyDMU online hub by students, echoing increasing engagement with staff training and development, ensuring the whole-university approach to mental wellbeing. The concepts of belonging and connectedness are being considered and discussed through various feedback methods, and there are plans to repeat the Pulse survey as the first year of delivery draws to a close. Repeating the Pulse survey, whilst adding further questions about belonging, offer the Embedding Mental Wellbeing team greater opportunity to explore and understand the impact of the change to block delivery on the students who have experienced it in its first year of operation.



Evaluations during implementation have provided opportunity to explore where learning from this experience can be shared with the sector, in support of the transition to block delivery and the embedding of mental wellbeing to enhance the student experience.

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Artificial intelligence is not accountable for the production of this research output, or any part therein, including the contributing methodologies, results, and discussions.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Pulse survey questions

Key Satisfaction Measures [Responses invited on a sliding 10-point scale]

1. How satisfied / dissatisfied are you with your overall teaching and learning experience so far?
2. And, how satisfied / dissatisfied are you with the quality of your course so far?

First Impressions: To what extent do you agree / disagree with the following statements? [Responses invited on a rating scale: Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither / Disagree / Strongly Disagree]

1. I feel comfortable with the academic requirements of the course
2. I feel that I made the right choice with the course that I'm studying
3. I feel supported in my transition to university study
4. The induction process worked well and helped me integrate into university life

Course Specifics: To what extent do you agree / disagree with the following statements related to your first module? [Responses invited on a rating scale: Strongly Agree / Agree / Neither / Disagree / Strongly Disagree]

1. The level of interaction with teaching staff supports my learning
2. I am enjoying focusing on one module at a time
3. I have made strong connections with other students on my course
4. I know where to go to seek help and support
5. The workload is manageable
6. I am challenged in my learning
7. I'm happy with the level of feedback and speed of response I get from teaching staff
8. Focusing on one module suits my lifestyle / is good for my work-life balance
9. Overall Satisfaction [Responses invited on an 11-point scale: Strong Angry to Strongly Disagree]
10. I know I made the right decision by choosing De Montfort University
11. I would recommend De Montfort University to my friends

As this is a new approach to teaching at DMU, please use the space below to comment on any of the areas covered by this survey [Qualitative, free-text comments invited]

## Conflict of Interest

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