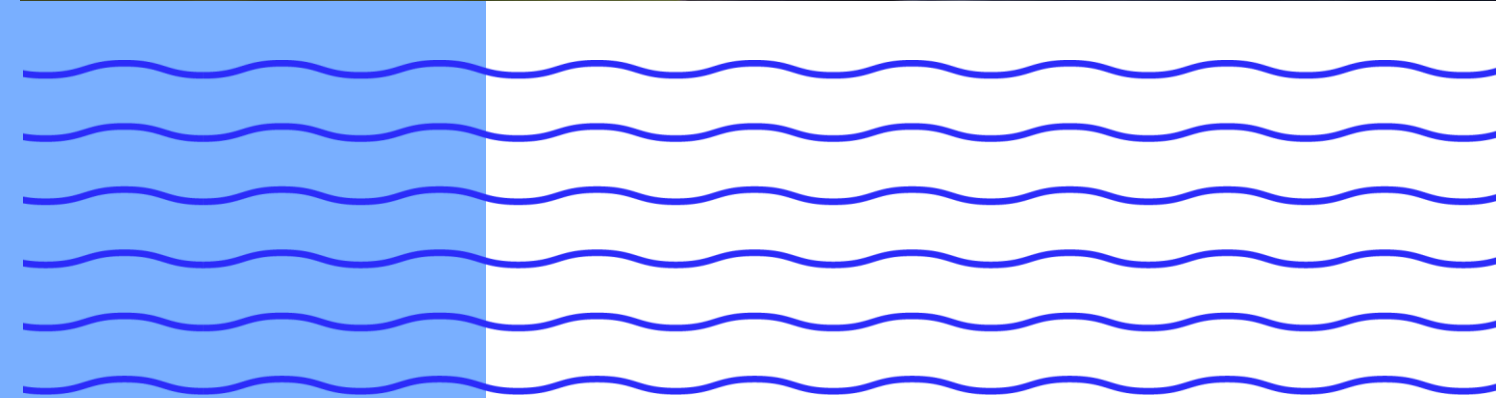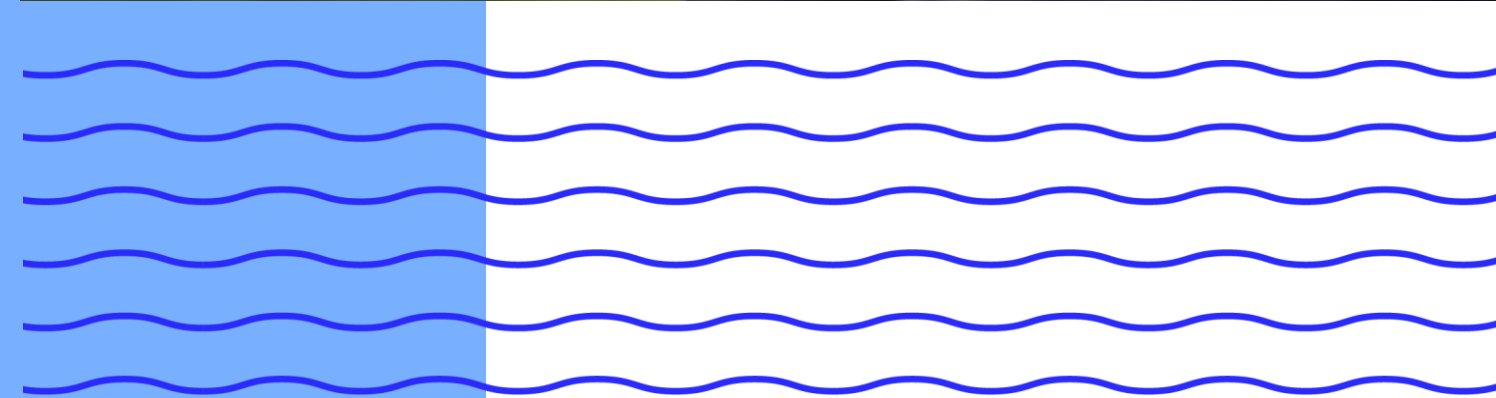# Mental health and teaching and learning

Mental health and teaching and learning

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Mental health

- Specific content where related to the course
- Credit bearing or compulsory dedicated non-subject content
- Extra curricular
- Wider community issues and activities
- Services and facilities
- How programmes are delivered, taught and assessed

November 2021

- Half of all students polled self-reported "very high" anxiety (a score of 9 or 10 out of 10),

- Almost six in ten (58 percent) for those who attended 0 hours of in-person teaching, learning or placement in the previous week.

- 13 percent of students reported low life satisfaction (a score of 4 or below out of 10), increasing to 19 percent for those attending 0 hours.

- This group also reported higher levels of loneliness.

NOVEMBER

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Third years

3rd

	2020	2021
Jan	Normal	LOCKDOWN
Feb	Normal	LOCKDOWN
Mar	→ LOCKDOWN	→ Step 1
Apr	LOCKDOWN	→ Step 2
May	LOCKDOWN	→ Step 3
Jun	STAY ALERT	Step 3
Jul	EAT OUT	→ 'Normal'
Aug	EAT OUT	'Normal'
Sep	RULE OF 6	'Normal'
Oct	TIERS	'Normal'
Nov	'LOCKDOWN'	'Normal'
Dec	TIERS	PLAN B

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Third years

- 4 in 10 (43 percent) said they felt very or fairly unprepared for their next step after graduating or finishing their degree or course

- 6 in 10 say the pandemic has had a negative impact on preparedness for graduation.

- Two-thirds (67 percent) said that the pandemic had a major or significant impact on their academic performance, significantly higher than the student population as a whole (48 percent).

- Around four in ten (43 percent) said they felt fairly or very unprepared for their next step after graduating or finishing their course

- Mental health self-perception among this group was worse than both the rest of the population and other students.

	2020	2021
Jan	Normal	LOCKDOWN
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Wellbeing

- Everyone's problem (everyone's solution?)

- Surroundings, activity and behaviour, quality and quantity of our social connections and understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world.

- As a consequence, every aspect of university life will have a potential impact on the wellbeing of students – whether considered and planned for or not.

- So curriculum is important to mental health and wellbeing because it is one of the few guaranteed points of contact between students and the university.

- It is also central to the student experience as it provides focus, structure, engagement, connection and purpose.

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Why T&L?

- There is a link between student mental health and wellbeing and student learning, persistence, creativity, problem solving, satisfaction and achievement.

- Students who experience poor mental health are more likely to withdraw, underperform and be dissatisfied with their learning and experience.

- Positive wellbeing has been associated with better and deeper learning, higher levels of creativity and problem solving, higher achievement and better levels of student satisfaction.

- How students are taught and assessed, and how they engage with learning, can have an impact on their wellbeing.

- There are then practical, financial and moral reasons to ensure that the curriculum is supporting good wellbeing and learning.

COURSE REPS

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How much anxiety is OK?

- What should students be able to "push through", and what should be treated with concern?

- How should we respond to increased levels of anxiety?

- And when it comes to stress and anxiety, what are the dividing lines between helpful, tolerable, intolerable and harmful?
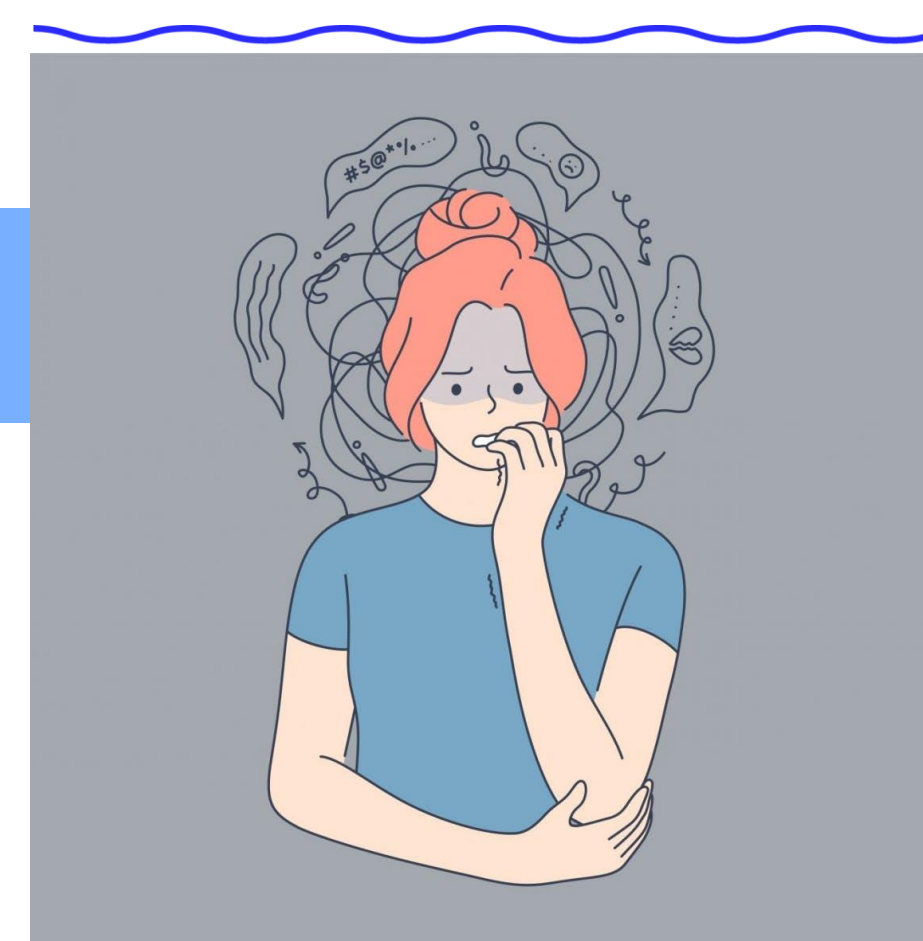
What is anxiety?

- Anxiety is a fear response to a perceived threat. Students become anxious about education when they view it or the environment as a threat to them.

- That may be stimulated by social and cultural experiences, which, for instance, leave students feeling marginalised, ostracised or humiliated.

- Alternatively, it may arise from a fear of failure or the perceived consequences of failure.

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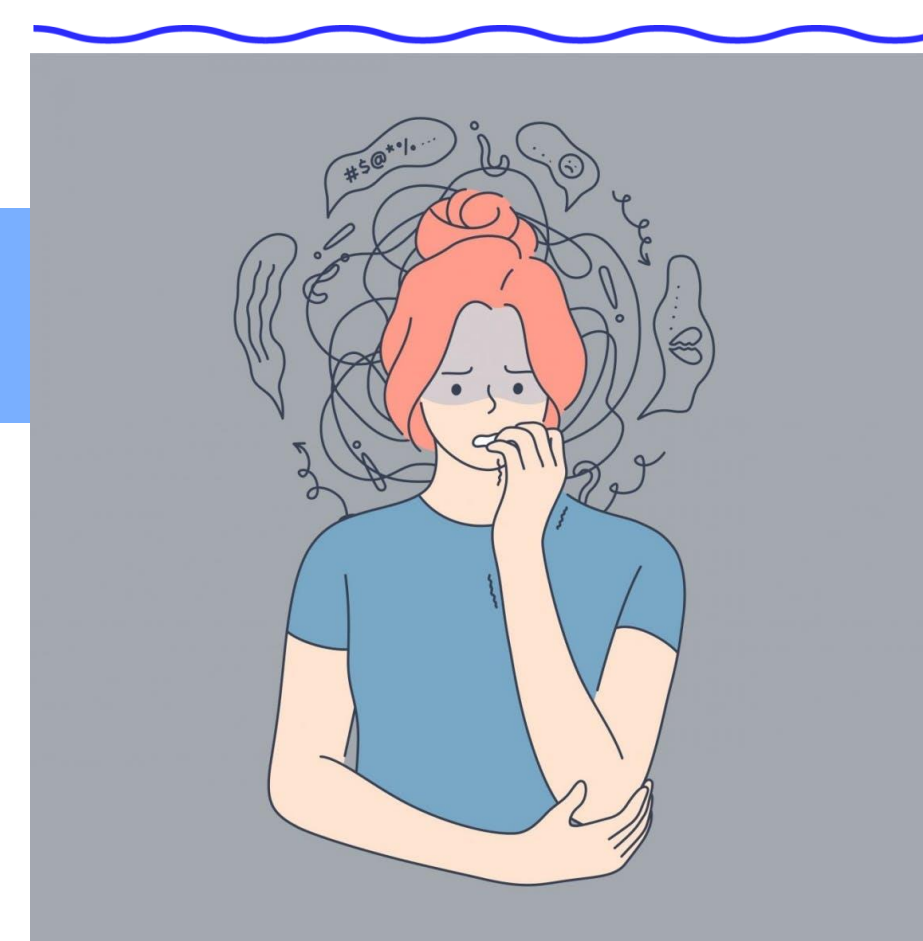
Pedagogy – three ideas

- **Stretch** is being challenged in ways that can be positive for learning, wellbeing and achievement. It has been shown to be helpful in motivating someone to engage in helpful behaviours (such as studying and academic performance). Being challenged pushes us to grow and develop. Meeting and overcoming challenges by mastering new skills and knowledge has powerful, positive payoffs for wellbeing.

- **Boredom** can have a negative effect on wellbeing. A lack of challenge in our lives can lead to low motivation and a lack of meaning and purpose. Students in a co-creation group that worked on the toolkit reported that when they found modules boring, they became disengaged, lost motivation and began to doubt their future, which in turn reduced their mood.

- **High levels of stress and anxiety** can reduce cognitive functioning at a neurological level. This reduces students' ability to engage in complex thinking, to access old memories or make new, complex memories, to problem solve and to maintain concentration. In other words, anxiety reduces the capacity for learning and academic performance at a biological level.

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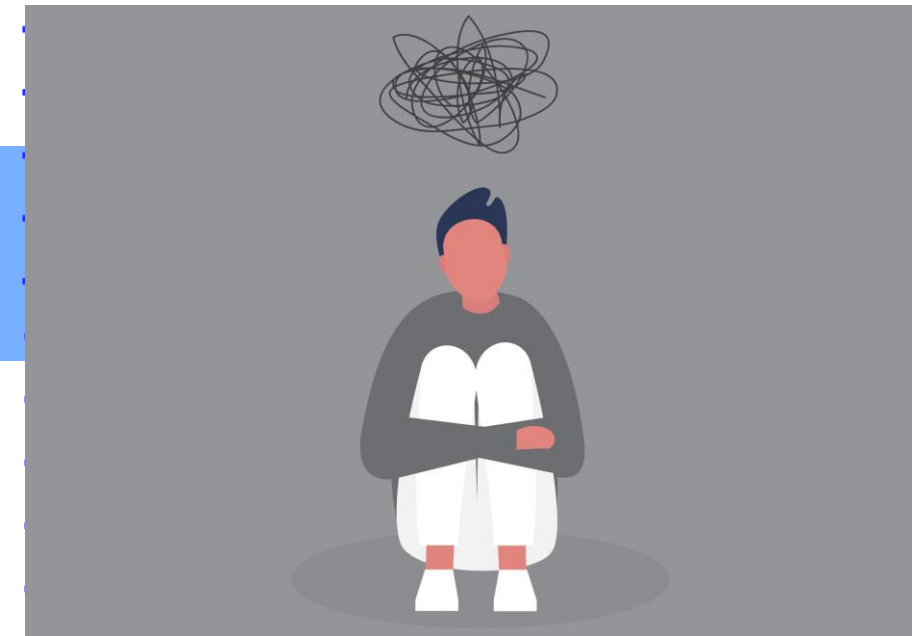
Questions to ask

- Was I appropriately prepared and did I understand what I had to do and how to do it?

- Did I recognise my own skills and resources?

- Did I have the necessary skills to undertake the task or was I able to develop them as a result of completing the task?

- Did I have the necessary and appropriate support from staff?

- Did I have the necessary and appropriate support from other students?

- Did I have the resources I needed – including time?

- Did I feel intrinsically motivated and focussed on the aspects of the task that were meaningful to me?

- Was I in an environment that felt psychologically safe?

Standards and scores

- If students need to know, understand or be able to do something, it must be taught to them first.

- If students have previous experience of a task and know how to tackle it, they will be less anxious.

- Normalising mistakes in the classroom (online or face to face) can create a learning environment that lowers anxiety and increases learning.

- Classroom activities that identify students' current level of knowledge and understanding mean that teaching and learning activities can be calibrated to the group.

Curriculum

- Changes to the structure of the curriculum, to curriculum content, to modes and methods of assessment, to grading and to the social environment within the classroom (online and in person) and in group learning activities, have the potential to improve both student wellbeing and learning.

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How to get it wrong

- curricula can undermine students' sense of autonomy if it is **overly prescriptive** or if students **do not have clarity** on why they are being asked to engage in particular learning and assessment tasks.

- curricula can undermine students' sense of competence and achievement if it is not **appropriately stretching,** if **feedback** is overly **critical or absent,** if students are not supported to **develop their ability to self-reflect** on their own growth.

- curricula can undermine autonomous motivation if learning is **confused,** improperly **sequenced,** lacks **personal meaning** and **assumes the existence of pre-knowledge** which students do not have.

WONKHE
SUs

How to get it wrong

- deadline bunching results in students having to complete significant amounts of work at the same time, potentially competing with other responsibilities leading to exhaustion and the adoption of surface leaning strategies.

- the learning environment feels hostile or potentially threatening – e.g., if it lacks psychological safety or peers are characterised as the competition rather than collaborative learners.

- the learning environment encourages students to adopt unhealthy study behaviours – going without sleep, working long hours without breaks, etc.

Standards and scores

- Learning provides meaning, purpose and a sense of fulfilment

- The learning environment is inclusive, supportive, health promoting and psychologically safe

- The curriculum supports sustainable personal growth in knowledge, understanding, skills and confidence

- The curriculum engages student voice and teaching, learning and assessment are modified in response to student learning, experience and insight

Assessment

- Risk point which can create unhelpful stress, anxiety, self-doubt and fatigue.

- This is particularly the case when students and assessment design have a performance focus – when reaching a specific set of predetermined standards is the reason assessment exists and is the centre of student focus.

- This is what is meant by "high stakes" assessment – there is a significant price to pay for failure – and students will be focussed mainly or solely on what they need to do to succeed.

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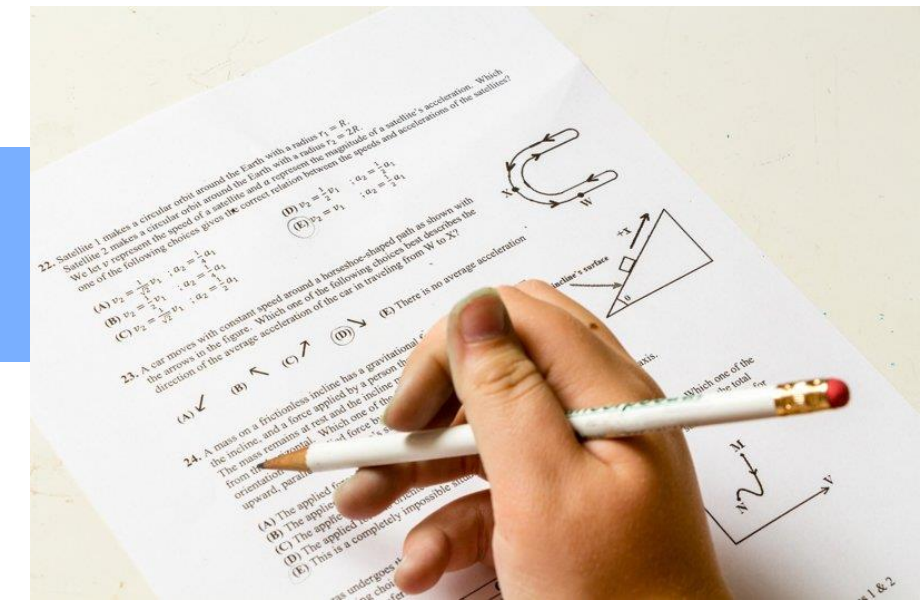
Good for wellbeing

While assessment is often associated with risks to wellbeing, if well designed it can support learning and wellbeing.

- Assessment for learning places a priority on promoting student **learning,** rather than on measuring ability to **meet predetermined criteria.**

- **Assessment for learning** is seen as a component part of teaching and learning. Learning can be supported through the **design** of the task, through **feedback** and through accompanying exercises.

- An assessment for learning strategy can support a **performance focussed culture that is beneficial** for learning and wellbeing.
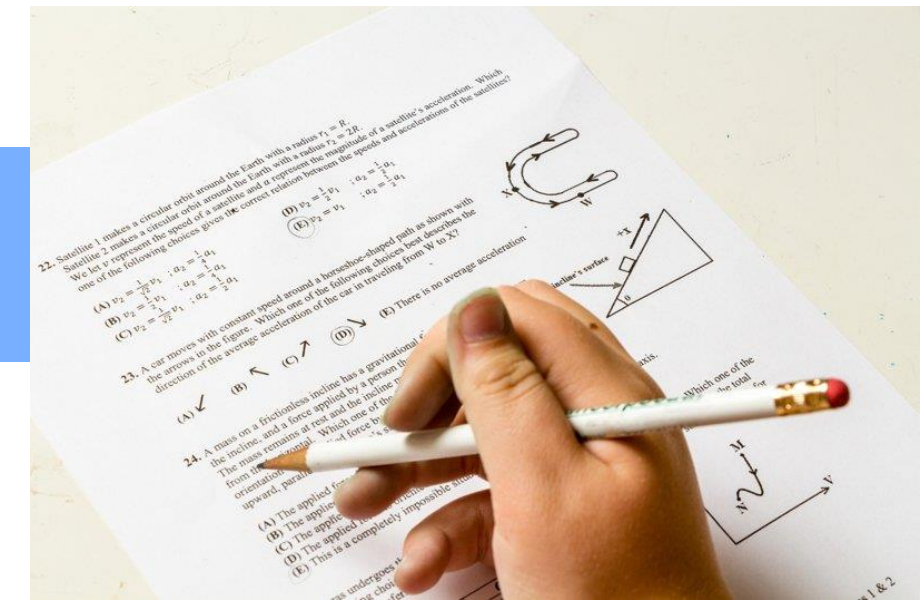
Standards and scores

- Was it clear what knowledge, understanding and skills I was developing when assessment was set?

- Were assessment briefs used to highlight the learning and development students expected by completing the task?

- Were there accompanying meta-cognitive tasks, like requiring students to reflect on their own work or provide responses to feedback detailing how they will apply it in future learning?

- Was feedback used to highlight the learning and development students gained from completing the task?

Psycho-safety

- In a psychologically safe learning environment, students feel safe to make mistakes, take risks to further their learning and thinking and ask for help and support when needed.

- Psychological safety makes it more likely that students will engage in classroom activities and debates - this supports learning and helps develop a sense of community and belonging.

- An unsafe environment can raise anxiety and lead to class avoidance and/or disengagement.

- Psychological safety must be planned for and time must be devoted to establishing and maintaining a healthy classroom culture.

- Students will need to witness a safe environment being maintained consistently before they will trust it.

Standards and scores

- Induction/orientation and/or the first class of term to focus on creating cohort identity, a safe social environment and social rules.

- Positive feedback to students who contribute early, encourage debate and be willing to show own learning.

- Discuss of mistakes to show that they are a normal part of the learning process.

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Community, identity, status

- Research has shown that social connection is a basic human need, necessary for wellbeing and health

- Social environments can have profound effects on wellbeing and cognitive functioning, with 'toxic' environments having the potential to reduce an individual's capacity for thought, decision making and good health

- Social and cultural environment of the classroom has a key role in learning and wellbeing (whether the classroom is virtual or in person).

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Factors

Shared identity, Social rules, Inclusivity

- Classroom culture (online and in person) is crucial to student learning, persistence and wellbeing

- Students can benefit from a shared social identity, a sense of community and helpful and health social norms and rule – an environment that facilitates peer-learning, collaboration rather than a competitive environment.

- Creating a healthy classroom culture requires explicit attention and should be a feature of curriculum design

- Use induction/orientation and/or the first class of term to focus on creating cohort identity, a safe social environment and social rules

- Use opportunities to identify how a range of prior experiences enriches the learning environment

- Use the academic discipline to co-create a shared sense of community

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In the toolkit

- Deep and Surface Learning, Finding Meaning in Learning, Curriculum Coherence, Sustainable Challenge, Desirable Difficulty, Workload, Assessment for Learning

Workload

- While hard work can be good for wellbeing, the structure of a student's workload can have negative consequences for wellbeing and the depth of their learning.

- Deadline bunching can cause students to become overwhelmed and to adopt surface level strategies. Bunching can also undermine motivation and self-belief.

- Negative impacts can be greater for students with other commitments who have less flexibility in their time.

- Workload structures need to be planned into curriculum design and across modules to produce sustainable challenge.

Questions:

- What is the structure and spread of student workload across the curriculum?

- Do students understand how to approach assessments, to create greater confidence that they can complete it competently and reduce perceptions that workload is too great?

- Do students have stretching academic activity across the whole of term, to build sustainable challenge?

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There's also...

- Scaffolded Design
- Learner Development
- Getting students back on track
- A significant number of case studies

- Key is enabling students to analyse their experience rather than react to it reflexively.
- Also: You can see why understanding of/training on M/H so important for academics. Not (just) about distress in 121s!
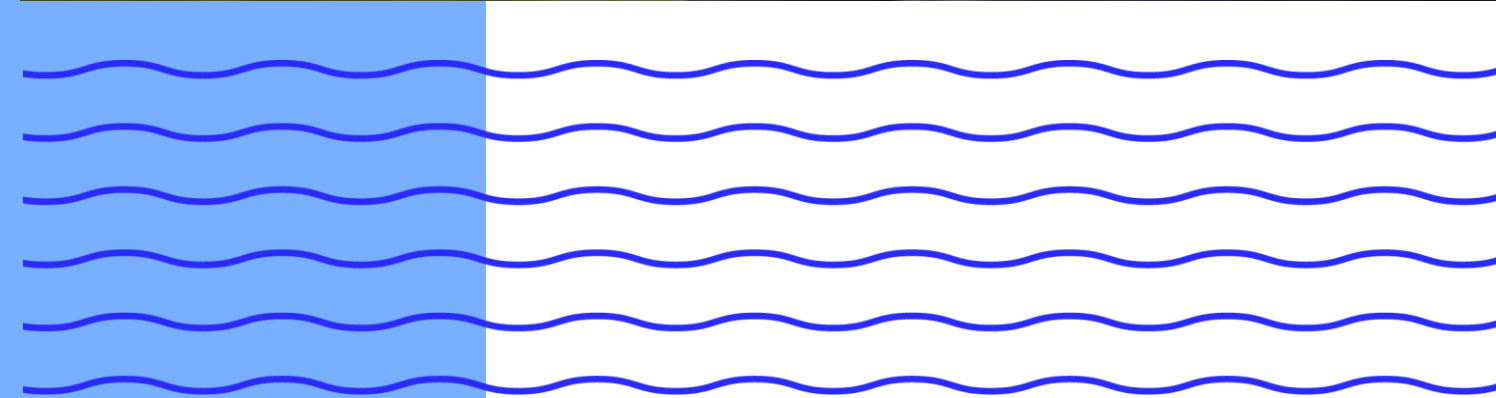
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When a student presents in distress

- It is inevitable that students will disclose mental health problems and present in distress to academics.

- Being prepared can help academics respond effectively, within the boundaries of their role.

- Academics are not responsible for providing qualified mental health support – a helpful structured conversation can help students access appropriate support.

- Where there is potential risk, academics must tell an appropriate person by appropriate means. Confidentiality does not prevent this.

- Explain role and boundaries to students when first meet, so they are not surprised when suggest they access support from colleagues in Student Services.

- Be honest about what can and cannot do.

- Give conversation a structure and, as much as possible, let students take responsibility and control of the situation.

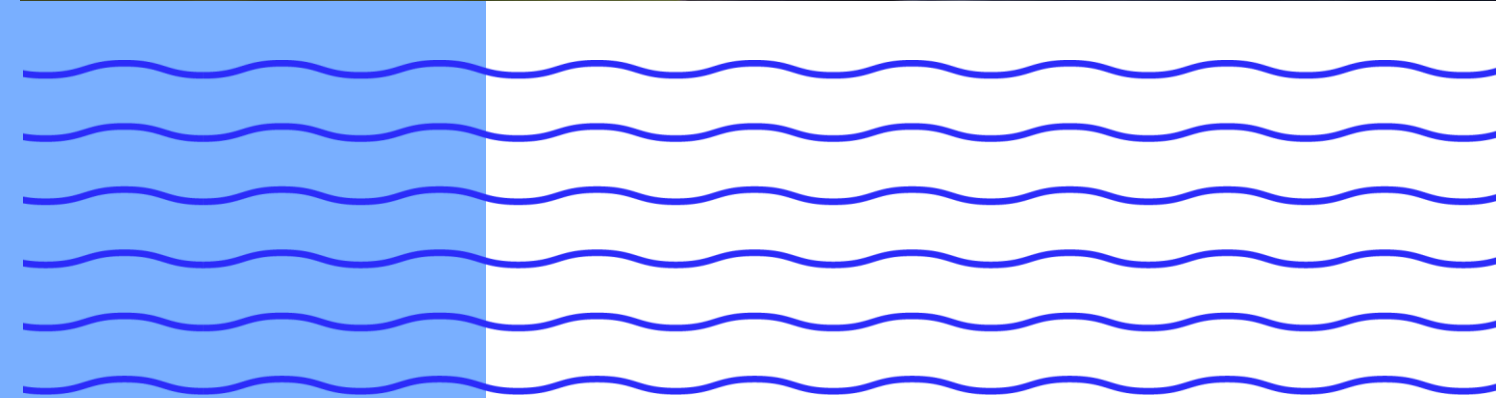- Know who can be contacted if concerned about a student and how contact them.

Mental health and teaching and learning

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