Wellbeing Day: Co-producing events with students to promote wellbeing

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Abstract

Wellbeing comprises both positive and negative feelings and emotions and is directly impactful upon mental health. At university, students are exposed to a multitude of experiences that can both benefit and impair wellbeing, such as the transition to social and academic independence. It is widely recognised that students are vulnerable to mental ill-health and poor wellbeing is a catalyst of this. Including students in decision-making about their lives fosters student empowerment and belongingness, which are both predictors of positive wellbeing. Centring students in decision-making via co-production may be effective in benefitting student wellbeing. Co-production concerns the prioritisation of the lived experiences of a target population within the design and implementation of a product or service, facilitated by professionals. Within this review, we will draw upon Wellbeing Day, a departmental event co-produced for students, to evaluate the effectiveness of co-production upon student wellbeing. Wellbeing Day took place in November 2022 at a UK-based university and was entirely co-produced by a group of teaching-focused staff and a group of undergraduate and postgraduate students. We encourage student-facing staff across universities to engage in co-production with students to promote student wellbeing.

Introduction

Wellbeing and mental health are important components in navigating everyday life (Galderisi et al., 2015). Wellbeing comprises satisfaction with life which is socially constructed by the environment around us (Ferguson, 2006; Manwell et al., 2015). Mental health is also related to the social construction of our environments but is more centred around our ability to recognise and balance emotions and their impact upon social and cognitive skills (Galderisi et al., 2015). Wellbeing and mental health are linked. In fact, Holm-Hadulla and colleagues (2021) argue that maintaining wellbeing is critical in avoiding mental ill-health. For example, experiencing low wellbeing (e.g., feeling dissatisfied with life goals) can lead to negative emotions such as sadness or anger (Xu et al., 2020). If prolonged, this may result in impaired cognitive skills (e.g., inability to perform day-to-day tasks; Kircanski et al., 2012) or social skills (e.g., social avoidance; Fernandez-Theoduloz et al., 2019), which are predictors of mental ill-health (e.g., depression; Wascowicz et al., 2021). Experiencing mental ill-health can have profound long-term outcomes, such as social isolation (Samuolis et al., 2015) and chronic health problems (Shaffer-Hudkins et al., 2010).

Student wellbeing

University students have an elevated risk of experiencing low wellbeing and mental ill-health (Storrie et al., 2010). In fact, mental ill-health, particularly anxiety and depression, is rising amongst university students (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Mistler et al., 2011; Siversten et al., 2019). Challenges specific to university students may increase the risk of experiencing low wellbeing and mental ill-health. One such challenge is the transition in independence between attending college/sixth form compared to university (Briggs et al., 2012). The typical age range of university students globally is 18-24 years (HESA, 2019; OECD, 2023; Universities UK, 2019); a developmental stage known as 'emerging adulthood' (Sawyer et al., 2018). During this developmental stage, individuals are rapidly developing social, emotional and financial independence whilst continuing in physical development (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Patton et al., 2016; Sowell et al., 2003). The scale of change is magnified for university students who are simultaneously navigating a new environment as well as being expected to educationally perform to a high level (Macaskill, 2013; Scanlon et al., 2010). Coping with the many components of the transition to university can be challenging. If a student feels overwhelmed or unsuccessful in their management of this transition their wellbeing may suffer and in turn their mental health (Montgomery & Côté, 2003; Scanlon et al., 2010).

Yet, even successfully navigating the transition to university does not guarantee positive wellbeing experiences. A multitude of challenges can present at different times. Students may experience academic stress such as managing deadlines and exam performance (Reddy et al., 2018). Students may also experience financial stress such as budgeting and managing loan repayments (Heckman et al., 2014). Further, students may experience social stress such as fluctuating romantic relationships (Verhallen et al., 2019) or difficulties with living conditions (Foulkes et al., 2009). Being exposed to such a range of stressors over the course of just a few years can be intense and particularly detrimental upon wellbeing (Ribeiro et al., 2018). Developing coping mechanisms to manage wellbeing is important for mental health over time (Kotera & Ting, 2021). When we consider the unique stressors that university students experience and the potential impact upon wellbeing and mental health it is clear that students' wellbeing should be prioritised.

A sense of community is a strong component of high wellbeing (McAneney et al., 2015). Campbell and colleagues (2022) identified community as a core factor of wellbeing particularly amongst university students, and even as a mitigator of the stress around the transition to university. The broader university ethos, particularly shaped by staff, is an important factor in building a sense of community (Bauer & Bauer, 1994; Hayes, 2023; Tinto, 1998; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Staff are important in mitigating the potential barriers to student wellbeing and in turn supporting students in developing coping mechanisms.

The stigma around accessing wellbeing services is widely evidenced as a barrier to student wellbeing (Batchelor et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2009). Asking for help can be viewed as a sign of weakness (Corrigan et al., 2009) and for students, in particular, a sign of incompetence (Karaffa & Hancock, 2019). Students may refrain from asking for help as they fear staff will perceive them as unable to cope with their studies, thus impacting their academic performance (Martin, 2010). If students have grown up in an environment where mental health and wellbeing are not prioritised, they are even less likely to ask for help at university (Gulliver et al., 2019; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Also,

students who have pre-existing mental health conditions may refrain from asking for help; this may be as a result of previously negative experiences (Clement et al., 2015). Stigma concerning university wellbeing services is in fact evidenced by the over somatisation of low wellbeing (Zhang & Dixon, 2003); rather than accessing wellbeing services, students are more likely to seek medical support for symptoms of low wellbeing (e.g., stomach-ache, sleep difficulty; Russell et al., 2008).

Another barrier to student wellbeing is simply being unaware of what services are available (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; NUS-USI, 2017). Students may identify low wellbeing but be unaware of who to ask for help (Bernhardsdóttir & Vilhjálmsson, 2013) or what resources they can use (e.g., counselling, Marsh & Wilcoxon, 2015). As a result of this, students may seek informal support from their peers (Cage et al., 2018, 2020; Russell et al., 2008), but this elevates the risk of misinformation (Nan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019).

Staff have the power to break down these barriers to student wellbeing. By maintaining open discourse about wellbeing, staff can develop a community that challenges stigma around asking for help as well as making services/resources more identifiable (Baik et al., 2018; Dooris, 1999). Open discourse can be facilitated by staff actively discussing wellbeing with students (Cage et al., 2020; Wynaden et al., 2014) and signposting them to services (Eloff et al., 2021), as well as integrating wellbeing clearly within the environment (Cage et al., 2021). For example, Baik and colleagues (2018) propose that making services more visible on-campus, co-creating course design, and allowing students more choice and flexibility around assessments are all ways of developing open discourse about wellbeing, which break down barriers to student wellbeing by developing a sense of community.

Overall, university students are a target group at risk of experiencing low wellbeing. Staff are instrumental in developing a community which fosters the prioritisation of wellbeing and subsequently breaking down barriers to student wellbeing. Integrating wellbeing within the university environment is a suggested form of open discourse. Where successful, open discourse may support student wellbeing and limit experiences of ill-mental health.

Co-production

Baik and colleagues (2018) highlight co-creation and co-production as tools for integrating wellbeing into the university environment. Although similar, co-creation and co-production comprise different collaborative processes. Co-creation is where team members and stakeholders work together to identify a goal, devise a plan and deliver the outcome (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014). Co-production also includes both team members and stakeholders but focuses on this collaboration primarily within the design and delivery stages (Boyle & Harris, 2009; Vargas et al., 2022). The important distinction with co-production is that the goal and strategy are already set before stakeholders are involved (Etgar, 2008).

Vulnerable populations can benefit from the co-production process (Mulvale & Robert, 2021). Team members may be unaware of specific challenges that a vulnerable group face or the lived experiences of stakeholders (Park, 2020); this may be due to social and cultural barriers between team members and stakeholders. For example, if stakeholders are from a different socioeconomic background, stakeholders may be

unaware of the challenges they face in their everyday lives. In turn, this may result in mismatched expectations for the project. In fact, Steen and colleagues (2018) argue that social and cultural barriers between team members and stakeholders can break down trust. Low trust can influence stakeholders' withdrawal from the co-creation process and team members subsequently dominating the collaborative process resulting in ineffective outcomes (Flederus, 2015; Mchunu & Theron, 2018). Co-production, however, can be more effective in this instance. By setting the goal and strategy in advance expectations can be managed more successfully (Brandsen et al., 2018). Stakeholders can have a clearer understanding of the overall purpose of the process whilst still maintaining creative independence in the design and delivery (Brandsen et al., 2018). Additionally, team members can still manage the overall goals of the project whilst stepping back from the design and delivery; this is important for avoiding potential social or cultural barriers (Park, 2019). Allowing stakeholders autonomy also builds trust, which enhances the likelihood of project success (Steen et al., 2018). Setting these parameters is a key component of co-production and why it can be more effective than co-creation when working with vulnerable groups (Steen & Turnas, 2018).

When it comes to mental health and wellbeing, we know that students are a vulnerable group (Storrie et al., 2010). University staff are in a unique position where they can directly shape the student experience (Baik et al., 2019). Co-production may be an effective tool that staff can use to manage projects that impact the student experience, whilst ensuring that student voices are being prioritised in the process.

Co-production with students

Co-production is effective when working with students (Hayes, 2023). Setting parameters, a core component of co-production, allows for the expectations of students and staff to be managed (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018). Staff will be more aware of broader structural limitations, such as legislation (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 2002), financial restrictions (Raudla et al., 2015) and wider targets (Deem et al., 2007), that may shape the overall project goals. Students are less likely to be aware of these limitations and so by setting these parameters early on staff can ensure that student stakeholders' expectations are appropriately managed; this then allows for student stakeholders to proceed with the design and delivery stage without the presence of staff. Importantly, allowing student stakeholders the autonomy to proceed with the design and delivery of the project ensures that the outcomes are relevant to students' lived experiences and not influenced by staff's own biases (Bell & Pahl, 2021). Simultaneously, staff can be sure that students are not developing an unreasonable strategy.

Co-production is important for projects concerning student wellbeing (Hayes, 2023). We know that student wellbeing is highly nuanced, and that students' lived experiences are further shaped by cultural shifts (Amaya et al., 2019; Burns et al., 2020). Staff are therefore unlikely to understand the lived experiences of student wellbeing that is relevant to students currently at university. Co-production can allow for staff to set overall goals related to student wellbeing, such as organising an event or initiative on-campus, allowing for broader practicalities to be taken into consideration (e.g., structural limitations), whilst providing student stakeholders with

the autonomy to work on the design and delivery ensuring that the event/initiative is relevant to the lived experiences of students (Baik et al., 2018).

In addition to ensuring that student wellbeing is being accurately addressed within co-production, the process of co-production itself can have a direct effect upon student wellbeing. We know that self-esteem is a predictor of wellbeing (Baumeister et al., 2003; Ciarrochi et al., 2007), and we also know that self-esteem is particularly sensitive during emerging adulthood (Chung et al., 2014). With this in mind, developing student self-esteem may have a beneficial impact upon wellbeing overall (Çiçek et al., 2021) and co-production can be an effective way of doing so (Campbell et al., 2019; Hitchin, 2016; Jivan et al., 2017). Incorporating stakeholders within the co-production process highlights their importance and the fact that they are valued by the team members (Campbell et al., 2019; Heaton et al., 2016). Coupled with a positive experience of the co-production process and subsequently successful outcomes, this can boost stakeholder self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2019; Mayer & McKenzie, 2017). Students are at risk of experiencing low self-esteem particularly as they are navigating the transition to university (Lee et al., 2014; Salmela-Aro et al., 1997). Incorporating student stakeholders within the co-production process may be an effective tool for supporting student self-esteem and in turn, their wellbeing.

We know that students are a sensitive group at risk of experiencing low wellbeing. Co-producing wellbeing events may be an effective way of building a community that prioritises wellbeing and lowers the barriers that students may face to improving wellbeing. Co-production may be a powerful tool for effectively addressing student wellbeing as well as supporting student self-esteem.

Wellbeing Day: A reflection

Importantly, evidence around the co-production of wellbeing events within a university setting is limited. To explore this, we co-produced an event entitled ‘Wellbeing Day’ with a group of undergraduate and postgraduate students. By reflecting upon this event, we hope to inspire staff at other higher education institutions to also consider co-producing wellbeing events with students.

Setting parameters

An important first step of co-producing Wellbeing Day comprised the recruitment process. As experienced staff members, we recognised the qualities required to be a stakeholder for this particular event; for example, being able to take initiative as well as work well within a team would be crucial qualities for our stakeholders. It was therefore important for us to lead the recruitment stage in order to set the parameters of who our stakeholders would be. Advertisements were placed on an online student portal and also emailed to all undergraduate and postgraduate students within the department and students were invited to submit a CV and cover letter; following this, students were invited to interview. We know that providing students with opportunities to practice the application and interview process is helpful for later employability (Maher, 2010; Perera et al., 2018) as it provides a safe space for reflection (Jollands et al., 2017). Further, by explicitly outlining the benefits of this opportunity, namely skill development and experience that can be used for future CVs, cover letters and

interviews, we were able to engage students and overcome potential stigma around wellbeing. By highlighting that students will be integral to the process, and making the benefits clear, co-production may be an effective tool for minimising the stigma around accessing certain services.

Within this stage of the process, we prioritised equality and diversity; this was imperative for ensuring that our selected stakeholders represented a range of student demographics (Mahlagu, 2019). Specifically, our stakeholders were aged between 19-22 years ranging from undergraduate to masters level of study, four stakeholders identified as female and one as male, two stakeholders identified as White British, one as East Asian, and two as Mixed (British and Asian; Middle Eastern and Black African). Upon reflection, this was a very important stage of the co-production process and one that is not often highlighted within co-production literature. Particularly in relation to wellbeing, we know that different demographic groups have very different wellbeing experiences (Lee et al., 2022; Lynam et al., 2021; Woodford et al., 2018). Recruiting a diverse group of stakeholders ensured that the design and delivery stage addressed wellbeing which related to a range of students and not just one particular demographic. Equally, it was important that the staff involved also represented diverse backgrounds so that the setting of parameters was embedded within our prioritisation of equality and diversity. Staff members comprised seven females (four identified as White British, one as White European, one as South Asian and one as Mixed – British and Black African), three males (one identified as White British, one as Middle Eastern and one as White European) and one non-binary (identified as White European) ranging in age (23-50 years) and career level (post-doctoral to professor).

Following the recruitment stage, we ran a workshop for our stakeholders in order to set the parameters of the overall goals for the event (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018). Workshops have been evidenced as particularly useful when engaging in co-production especially ahead of the design and delivery stage (Kuti & Houghton, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2021). Within pre-existing co-production literature, workshops have been identified as important for explaining the long-term goals of the project and the wider implications/limitations that stakeholders should consider during the design and delivery stages (Ward et al., 2021; Bollard et al., 2022). Indeed, this was an important component of the workshop we ran for Wellbeing Day, although we extended this further by also considering the opportunity to upskill our student stakeholders. Considering the role that co-production can play in supporting student self-esteem, we also included skills training within the workshop. For example, student stakeholders received training around teamwork (to support them in working together through the design and delivery stages), events management (to support them in organising the event and running it on the day) and safeguarding (to support them with any wellbeing issues that may arise from attendees on the day). All of these topics directly related to the nature of Wellbeing Day and the co-production process, but also provided the student stakeholders with training that may benefit them in the future. We believe that incorporating training into a co-production workshop ahead of the design and delivery stages is especially important for students. When we consider the potential benefits upon self-esteem and how this may positively influence wellbeing, it is worthwhile providing student stakeholders with this opportunity.

Design and delivery

Once the student stakeholders had completed the workshop, they were then provided with an independent space to proceed with the design stage. Providing stakeholders with an independent space, where team members are physically separated from them, is imperative in ensuring that no biases influence the main design of the project (Bell & Pahl, 2018; Janes, 2016). With Wellbeing Day having an explicit focus upon wellbeing, this separate space was even more imperative. We know that discussing wellbeing, in general, can be difficult (Davies, 2012; Ward et al., 2012) and that discussing wellbeing with staff members is even more difficult (Batchelor et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2009). With this in mind, it was crucial that we as staff members were not present during the design stage of the co-production process. Importantly, this allowed our student stakeholders to discuss student wellbeing more openly which allowed for the subsequent design to target student wellbeing more directly.

The student stakeholders independently designed an afternoon of wellbeing-themed activities divided into four key areas of student wellbeing: 1) wellbeing practices, 2) wellbeing support, 3) wellbeing in a community, and 4) student-staff wellbeing. Wellbeing practices comprised activities such as mindfulness colouring and meditation. Wellbeing support comprised a series of talks from services available on campus such as Student Services and Student Wellbeing. Wellbeing in a community comprised a series of taster sessions provided by student societies (e.g., the Dance Society and the Pokémon Society). Student-staff wellbeing comprised evening events including a wellbeing themed quiz and a bake sale (all baked treats were themed around wellbeing). Importantly, these activities were all organised and ran by the student stakeholders. The event was attended by approximately 100 students who provided very positive informal verbal feedback. From this, we can informally conclude that the event was a success and it is worth engaging in co-producing with students in the future.

Conclusions, reflections and future directions

Wellbeing Day was a co-produced event which targeted student wellbeing by placing students at the centre of the event. By acknowledging the importance of student wellbeing and co-production as a methodological tool, we were able to couple the two into a strategy that we believe other institutions should also adopt. As this was the first event of its kind within our department, there was much to reflect upon. Mainly, although the day was subjectively a success, we did not empirically evaluate the student stakeholder involvement nor the views of attendees. We did receive a great deal of positive verbal feedback from the students who attended and the environment of the day certainly felt positive. Of course, we cannot conclude from this alone that the day was a confirmed success – although it certainly felt like it! Our future plans are to ensure that a formal evaluation process occurs in order to objectively evaluate the co-production process and where it can be improved. We aim to conduct this via two strands: firstly, students (both the stakeholders and the attendees) will be invited to provide formal feedback via an online form, this will allow for more quantifiable evidence of the success of the day as well as more explicit feedback that can be drawn upon for future co-produced events; secondly, attendees will be invited (following informed consent) to participate in an evaluative study of the event, this will comprise an online survey whereby attendees will complete an online measure of wellbeing

upon their arrival and then again upon their leave, this will allow for quantitative analysis to measure whether wellbeing scores increased following attendance of Wellbeing Day. Importantly, by completing these two strands of evaluation, we will be able to provide more concrete evidence of the success of the day.

Importantly, we encourage broader structures within the university setting to consider the contents of these co-produced wellbeing events. With regards to Wellbeing Day, four key areas of student wellbeing were prioritised by our student stakeholders (wellbeing practices, wellbeing support, wellbeing in a community, and student-staff wellbeing); this provides insight into what students value in terms of their wellbeing. By doing this, other initiatives can build upon the core components of student wellbeing.

Wellbeing Day provides an example of how student wellbeing can be prioritised via co-producing wellbeing themed events with student stakeholders. The current literature into co-production is growing but remains limited in terms of university students. We argue that not only is student wellbeing important, but that co-producing with student stakeholders is crucial in accurately understanding and supporting student wellbeing. We encourage other higher education institutions to take heed of Wellbeing Day and consider engaging with students via the co-production process.

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