

Public Information

Diversität konkret

A guide for teaching and learning at higher education institutions

Publisher:

The Centre for Quality Enhancement and Teaching Development (ZHQE) at the University of Duisburg-Essen

A guide from the Vice-Rectorate for University Culture, Diversity and International Affairs at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Vice-Rector Prof. Karen Shire (Ph.D.)

Editorial Team:

Dr. Nicole Auferkorte-Michaelis, Henning Haschke

Translation:

Rachel Cooper

Postal address:

Keetmanstraße 3-9, 47058 Duisburg

E-Mail:

info@komdim.org

Website:

www.komdim.org

ISSN:

2198-2473

License:

This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivates 4.0 International license (CC BY-ND 4.0).

Design:

Henning Haschke

Photo credits:

Adobe Stock standard license

komdim.de:

The Centre for the Development of EDI Competences in Higher Education (komdim.de) is a collaborative project from the University of Duisburg-Essen and TH Köln.



Overview

| | | |
|----|---|----|
| 1. | Introduction – Harvard University’s wellbeing framework | 4 |
| 2. | Strategies as a basis for everyday teaching | 5 |
| 3. | Sources and secondary literature | 11 |

komdim.de is constantly striving for greater diversity and therefore encouraged two university stakeholders to contribute their own ideas. This resulted in the first issue of *Diversität konkret* to be written by students.

Introduction

Students are in a phase of their lives where they are confronted with forming their own identity: they are exploring their stance in intellectual, social, professional and moral terms. Challenges such as time pressure, examination stress, difficulties making social connections, financial worries and anxiety about their future reduce students' sense of wellbeing. Studies have shown that students' physical and mental health have an impact on their learning ability and performance in their studies (see Lutz-Kopp et al. 2018: 256 et seq. & Stock 2017: 230 et seq.).

Teaching staff can support students facing these challenges by, for example, providing them with tools such as organisational skills, helping them create social networks and offering or referring them to additional consultation services.

In the German higher education sector, there are few starting points where discourse on student wellbeing can be integrated. The personal efforts of the individuals themselves are responsible for their emotional balance and their physical and mental health. Based on the following strategies suggested by Harvard University's wellbeing framework and the introduction of exemplary wellbeing formats from Germany and abroad, we aim to provide suggestions on how teaching staff can boost their students' learning ability and motivation in everyday teaching.

Harvard University's wellbeing framework depicts students' wellbeing as composed of eight overlapping components.

While the **emotional** component is concerned with emotional wellbeing, i.e. the recognition and acceptance of our own thoughts and feelings, the **physical** component refers to physical health and the body's needs. Both of these components form the basis for a stress-resistant lifestyle and long-term health.

Environmental wellbeing is covered by **environmental** component, which describes the positive effects of an eco-friendly lifestyle on individual wellbeing. However, for students to be healthy and satisfied, financial security is also necessary: students can guarantee financial wellbeing – the **financial** component – by mindfully planning their budget. Students' regular expenses also include those for personal development.

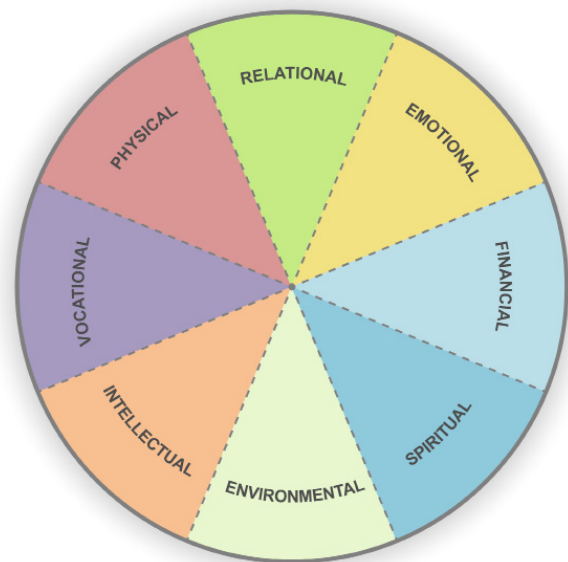


Figure 1: Wellbeing framework (adapted from Harvard University)

The **intellectual** component comprises intellectual transformation, with aspects such as critical thinking, problem solving and creativity, and is nourished by students broadening their horizons, particularly through interactions with other people. The **relational** component, concerning wellbeing with regard to relationships, builds on this and focuses on meaningful relationships with other people and communities. Students who have a stable network that is grounded in supportive relationships feel more satisfied and secure.

Networks with fellow students or teaching staff can effectively serve as a springboard for students' future planning and therefore also for vocational wellbeing, as represented by the **vocational** component. This component covers goals, decisions and the sense of meaning and purpose and is largely defined by experiences students have during their studies. A fulfilling occupation that aligns with the individual's own skills forms the basis for vocational wellbeing. However, it is not just the realisation of vocational ambitions that plays a large role in students' identity formation, but also their spiritual wellbeing. The **spiritual** component is centred around beliefs and moral values that provide meaning to our lives and can be continuously revisited and reassessed through self-reflection.

Emotional wellbeing – university life amongst pressure and setbacks

Mental health is the basis for students' good performance in their studies. Relaxation therefore plays a significant role in the **emotional** component. It ensures inner balance and a strengthened sense of self-worth.

However, due to unhealthy behavioural patterns with regard to stress and managing assignments, students do not view breaks as a requirement for their health, but rather as a reward for tasks completed. A critical inner voice, which can become a heavy burden for students, particularly those who feel the weight of high expectations both in a professional setting and in their private lives, is often responsible for this attitude. Particularly during the transition from school to university, first-year students are confronted with new challenges that can leave them feeling overwhelmed and under pressure. This results in students not allowing themselves to take a break.

Moreover, the many hours spent in front of a screen due to online learning, hybrid learning or blended learning formats also lead to a greater workload burden (see Ehrentreich 2021: 1) and offer less opportunity for rest. By virtually attending university from their own desk, students lack valuable distraction. They are unable to walk through the corridors with other students between classes or go to cafes, canteens or common areas.

The findings of the studies 'DigiLehreStud' and 'Pots-Blitz' underline that students perceive reduced contact with other students in particular to be problematic (see Breitenbach 2021:9). Easy access to online teaching also results in students who are ill or exhausted rather attending classes instead of taking time to recover. Deactivating their camera makes it easier for them to attend since it allows them to hide their mental or illness-related exhaustion.

Teaching staff can support students both with regard to their time management and to having a healthy relationship with breaks and relaxation. One approach could be presenting organisational strategies in their classes, such as the ALPEN or Eisenhower methods. Another approach could be making lists of (digital) tools available, as well as resources on topics such as scheduling, task distribution, creating presentations and communication. In this way, they are particularly helping to counteract students feeling overloaded and isolated.

With its **film series 'Learning how to learn'**, the **RWTH Aachen University** addresses students and gives them tips for successful time management with healthy rest periods. Here, the focus lies on the ALPEN and Eisenhower methods. These short films follow three students as they prepare for examinations and demonstrate various approaches to resolving difficulties in studying and planning.



Link: <https://www.rwth-aachen.de/go/id/mhacb>

These signals of support can give students great relief. In addition, teaching staff can not only prepare students for examinations or assignments with regard to course-specific content, but they can also make them aware early on that breaks and good performance are compatible. They can also increase engagement in their own classes this way. By showing interest in students, teaching staff make it clear that they are taking their situation seriously. Student participation increases when they find themselves in an environment where they are met with understanding.

In order to counteract students' critical inner voice, teaching staff can also point out that bad performance does not mean personal failure; it is rather a chance to gain a better understanding of the requirements and optimise learning or working methods for future examinations. To this end, it can be helpful to actively reach out to students with open opportunities to talk, such as during office hours. Usually, students only make use of staff members' office hours to discuss examinations or assignments; consultation on how to deal with the respective requirements and personal difficulties on an individual basis is rare. When teaching staff actively inform students about this opportunity, they relieve students of a burden and therefore give them the chance to work on their assignments with greater self-confidence and self-assurance.

Physical and environmental wellbeing – physical health and a sustainable lifestyle as a basis for satisfaction and good performance

It may seem to go without saying that students take personal responsibility for their physical health, leading a sustainable lifestyle and having a balanced diet. However, examination anxiety or poor time management skills can lead to them studying until late at night or staying up all night doing assignments while being less active due to tiredness and time pressure and spending little time outside. Ehrentreich et al. (2021) particularly highlight changed everyday routines among students during the pandemic. Due to distance learning, they often lack sufficient movement in their day-to-day life.

On top of that, a proportion of students eat more unhealthily due to stress and time pressure, eating ready meals for example – which also produce more plastic waste. The findings of the study *‘Einflüsse der Coronapandemie auf gesundheitsbezogene Verhaltensweisen und Belastungen von Studierenden’* (2021; Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on students’ health-related behaviours and stress) also show that around one third of the students surveyed ate more than usual during online teaching periods since they had constant access to food at home – unlike in seminar rooms (see Ehrentreich 2021: 4).

Since exercise (outdoors) and healthy, sustainable eating habits form the basis for physical and emotional health, the emotional, physical and environmental components of the wellbeing framework in particular are closely connected. All three areas also have similar triggers rooted in high pressure, poor time management and more difficult study conditions (due to online learning).

The physical component emphasises, amongst other things, the need for a balanced sport routine that not only ensures sufficient regular movement but also brings joy. In this way, students can reduce their stress, boost their energy and their self-esteem, and improve their mood. Healthy movement also improves students’ memory, concentration and productivity.

The wide range of courses offered by university sports services also includes sport and relaxation courses. Since most courses take place near campus and students benefit from discounts, access to these courses seems simple at first glance. However, there are still uncertainties among students regarding the possibilities and advantages of university sports.

Teaching staff can combat these uncertainties by making students in their classes aware of the wide range of courses on offer and explaining the positive effects of movement and exercise on their academic performance. In addition, short and regular active breaks during classes, either in person or online, can help to re-engage students’ body and mind. Teaching staff can encourage their students to leave their seats for a few minutes or loosen their shoulders, for example.

A healthy diet provides the body with important energy reserves and therefore gives it the necessary drive to perform well. It also improves students’ wellbeing and mood in the same way as sport. A fresh, nutritious diet goes hand in hand with an eco-conscious lifestyle, as recommended in the environmental component. Students can take care of their environmental wellbeing by taking responsibility for protecting the planet and leading a sustainable lifestyle – for example, through recycling, cycling, walking, avoiding the use of plastic, saving energy, reducing water consumption and having eco-conscious eating habits centred around regional products. In this regard, teaching staff can make students aware of sustainable ways of living.

Projects such as NEiS, which was launched by the **Consumer Association of North-Rhine Westphalia** in cooperation with the **University of Bonn** and the **University of Cologne**, teach students skills for forming eco-friendly, low waste eating habits in their daily life via online information pages, amongst other things. To this end, tips are available on topics such as healthy and sustainable diets, shopping, storing food, cooking and enjoying meals.

Link: <https://www.neis.nrw>





As they move out of their family home, many students are on their way towards living independently. They therefore develop their own daily routines, which also revolve around getting food and preparing it. Many introductory classes allow teaching staff to get to know their students better and to plan the semester. If teaching staff use these events to give students tips for their daily routines, they can not only break the ice that typically exists between them and the students, but also give the students additional advice that they are in acute need of.

An open approach to topics that may be assumed to be self-evident, such as physical activity, nutrition, environmental awareness and the previously mentioned areas of time management and relaxation, communicates to students that they aren't expected to put themselves last.

In the same way that their studies teach them subject-specific content and prepare them for the professional world, leading a healthy lifestyle is also a learning process that students are responsible for. Teaching staff play an important part as role models in this regard, and can therefore provide both academic and anecdotal input.

Financial wellbeing – money worries as an obstacle for students

Since students often face financial hurdles, the **financial** component recommends not only effectively planning budgets in advance, but also making use of financial advice services.

Most students have to do paid work to finance their living expenses. Students with limited financial means in particular not only have difficulties acquiring study and learning materials, but they are often also reliant on working increased hours in their part-time jobs.

This can lead to clashes with classes and make it more difficult to work on assignments or examinations. Money worries also constitute a considerable distraction from what should be their 'main occupation' – their studies. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, students' financial situations, in particular for those with limited financial means, have deteriorated further. Around 35% of students have lost their job due to pandemic-related reasons in Germany. The existential fears that go hand in hand with this job loss have a particularly negative effect on academic success (see Breitenbach 2021: 8).

In the guide '**Transitions. Helping you to navigate university life**' by the British mental health organisation **Student Minds**, students can find tips on managing or avoiding financial stress. First-hand reports with practical approaches towards solving issues in financial planning make this topic accessible for students.

Link: <https://www.studentminds.org.uk>

If teaching staff regularly make students aware of their university's support and counselling services, they can use their position of authority to remove the associated stigma. Students often find it difficult to address and tackle financial crises; open communication that is free of judgement on the part of the teaching staff can eliminate this inhibition. If teaching staff signal understanding and willingness to talk, as well as adapting study components to the actual circumstances of the relevant students as far as possible (for example by extending a deadline), they can help divert students' energy away from existential fears and fears of failure and focus it on their studies.

Intellectual and relational wellbeing – stimulation and stability through mutual exchange

Since it is not just grades or achievements but also intellectual growth that should be a focus of studying, the **intellectual** component is not just limited to lecture halls or seminars within the subject studied. Classes in other subjects, as well as cultural activities such as plays, museum exhibitions or readings, also expand students' horizons. By taking care of their intellectual wellbeing in this way, students develop their critical and creative thinking and improve their cognitive skills, as well as their concentration and memory.



The **'Methodensammlung für Dozierende'** (A collection of methods for teaching staff) from **Heinrich Heine University** (see Böddicker et al.) suggests suitable exercises for this, such as brainstorming, reverse brainstorming, or mindmaps.

Link: <https://www.sell.hhu.de/medien-und-materialien/oer-angebot-des-sell>

Teaching staff can use various creativity tools to encourage thought processes in classes. As well as this, they can also make students aware of extracurricular activities offered across the university, such as language cafés or language courses, choirs, debate clubs, cultural activities and trips, as well as courses available in the complementary elective component, since their intellect can be particularly stimulated through interaction with other participants. In order to break out of ways of thinking restricted to their own discipline, it can be helpful for staff to supplement their teaching content with interdisciplinary topics, for example through the use of field trips or co-operations with other subjects.

The **intellectual** and **relational** components are closely connected to each other: students can build and expand their social network (**relational**) by joining clubs, organisations or study groups (**intellectual**) and trying to establish contact with mentors and teachers.

Wellbeing in the **relational** component therefore focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships. Alongside immediate and extended family, friends and fellow students, teaching staff also play an important role here. Through regular interaction with teaching staff, students can get a better picture of the relevant requirements.

Moreover, teachers can use their office hours to pass on information to students about their research and the university, as well as potential careers, research positions, work placements and grant programmes. Teaching staff can also actively support their students in building networks by also becoming part of them. By doing so, they also benefit themselves. They not only gain a better insight into students' real-life situations, but they also participate directly in the individual development of the next generation of academics – meaning their teaching success is multiplied substantially.

In its article **'Building Your Support Network'**, **Oregon State University** explains to students that interpersonal relationships contribute significantly to academic success. According to this article, an individual's concentration and learning ability strongly depend on how comfortable they feel with the people around them.



Link: <https://success.oregonstate.edu/learning/support-network>

Vocational and spiritual wellbeing – future planning, experience and reflection as catalysts for personal and professional development

The **vocational** component draws on this academic and professional interaction. For their vocational wellbeing, it is essential that students actively explore various professional experiences, work placements and research opportunities and make use of study and career consultation services. Teaching staff can alleviate students' fears of making decisions that could be perceived to be wrong by making them aware of resources for consultation and support in a non-judgmental way. They can also invite curious or unsure students to make use of their office hours.

In addition, students can find inspiration at career events or through stays abroad. In this way, they get an idea of their professional opportunities and their individual strengths.

In order to prevent students getting overwhelmed, there is a need to raise awareness of the fact that not only is it important to explore your own ambitions and career opportunities, but also that this can take some time. Students should understand this as a type of transition phase where they can test themselves and reassess a lot of things. To help them, teaching staff can ask their students what their expectations, career goals and interests are.

Questions that lead to reflection such as 'What subject focus areas would you like to establish?', 'What is your next professional objective?' or 'What are your (study-related) strengths and how would you like to incorporate these into the class?' can be integrated into requests for students to provide information on their expectations or feedback. By doing so, they are not only supporting students in planning their own futures; teaching staff can also use this approach to get detailed responses about expectations and results.

Students' exploration of their own wishes and attitudes is not only reflected in the realisation of their professional goals, but also in the development of ethical values. The **spiritual** component therefore focuses on the necessity of students engaging with their own convictions, beliefs and moral principles for spiritual wellbeing.

Teaching staff can also encourage students to engage with their own value systems by incorporating ethical matters or social debates in their teaching. This allows

them to support their students in both reflecting on their own worldview and promoting their capabilities for discussion and abstract thought. Students therefore not only develop personally, but are able to place their course content in a broader context at the same time.

In the guide '**Transitions. Helping you to navigate university life**' by **Student Minds**, a focus is placed on ethical and moral values. It gives students the opportunity to use a questionnaire to become aware of what their own values are.

Link: <https://www.studentminds.org.uk>



Conclusion and outlook: a holistic well-being concept as a springboard for student development

Teaching staff can actively support students in establishing a mental and physical basis for success in their studies. When doing so, satisfaction and health should be thought of holistically and be expressed in the areas of mental and physical health, environmental awareness, financial security, intellectual growth, social networks, professional fulfilment and ethical values. This can allow challenges that distract from studying to be eliminated and students' engagement in their studies to be increased. In order to achieve this goal, teaching staff can offer various support services that all include open and non-judgmental dialogue.

Signalling understanding and willingness to help, as well as providing consultation, may not initially seem significant; however, for students this can be a huge, unexpected support. In addition to this, teaching staff can adapt their teaching content accordingly by, for example, integrating interdisciplinary topics or encouraging fundamental debates in order to therefore support students in forming their identities.

To familiarise students with wellbeing services in general, it could be helpful to make a digital toolbox available, for example within Moodle courses or included in online material related to a module, that includes all the different offers from the areas mentioned here. By presenting this toolkit at the beginning of the semester and reminding students of it regularly throughout it, teaching staff encourage their students to not lose sight of their own wellbeing.

Since this collection of resources can be used for any future classes, the creation of a toolkit is a one-time effort that would pay off manifold thanks to its positive effect on student motivation and performance. In addition, this open approach to wellbeing improves the interpersonal relationships between teaching staff and students.

It raises awareness of the importance of mental health and creates space for a shared dialogue on human pressures and obstacles when studying.

Teaching staff themselves can also benefit from a digital wellbeing toolkit to find inspiration and be able to select some of these tools for use in their own everyday teaching.

However, universities themselves are also called upon to play their part. In the context of student mental health, it is becoming clear that universities need to conform more with the individual realities of students' lives, motivate them more intensively to lead a healthy lifestyle and support them more actively in their personal development. A university should not be understood as a place purely for academic education, but also as a development space for young adults and an environment where they can successfully plan their future.

3. Sources and secondary literature

Böddicker, N., H. Hauch, A. Hinzer, M. Hofer, N. Karsten, A. Khan, A. Rubens-Laarmann & S. Wilhelm (2016): *Methodensammlung. Für Lehrende der Heinrich-Heine-Universität*. (A collection of methods. For teaching staff at Heinrich Heine University) https://www.hhu.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Lehre/Hochschuldidaktik/Downloads/Methodenbuch_Stand151216.pdf (accessed 22 April 2022).

Breitenbach, A. (2021): Digitale Lehre in Zeiten von Covid-19: Risiken und Chancen. (Digital teaching in the time of Covid-19: risks and opportunities) https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2021/21274/pdf/Breitenbach_2021_Digitale_Lehre_in_Zeiten.pdf (accessed 22 April 2022).

Ehrentreich, S., L. Metzner, S. Deraneck, Z. Blavutskaya, S. Tschupke, & M. Hasseler (2021): *Einflüsse der Coronapandemie auf gesundheitsbezogene Verhaltensweisen und Belastungen von Studierenden: Eine Erhebung an der Ostfalia Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften. Prävention und Gesundheitsförderung*. (Effects of the coronavirus pandemic on students' health-related behaviours and stress: a survey at the Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences. Prevention and promoting good health) <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11553-021-00893-2> (accessed 22 April 2022).

Grützmaker, J., B. Gusy, T. Lesener, S. Sudheimer & J. Willige (2018): *Gesundheit Studierender in Deutschland 2017. Ein Kooperationsprojekt zwischen dem Deutschen Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung, der Freien Universität Berlin und der Techniker Krankenkasse*. (Students' health in Germany in 2017. A cooperative project between the German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW), the Freie Universität Berlin and the Techniker Krankenkasse) <https://www.tk.de/resource/blob/2050660/8bd39eab37ee133a2ec47e55e544abe7/gesundheit-studierender-in-deutschland-2017-studienband-data.pdf> (accessed 18 October 2022).

Harvard University Health Services: Your Wellbeing. Wellbeing Framework. <https://wellness.huhs.harvard.edu/your-wellbeing> (accessed 22 April 2022).