

# FORUM

MEMBER  
MAGAZINE

*Discussing international education*



## WELL-BEING WITHOUT BORDERS

- 06 HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THRIVE
- 18 IN CONVERSATION WITH NIC BEECH
- 26 STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE
- 34 INCLUSIVE SERVICES AND SAFE SPACES

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# CONTENTS

## 04 EDITORIAL

## 05 CONTRIBUTORS

**06 HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THRIVE**  
International exchange is about more than just surviving

**09 REFLECTION: A PATHWAY TO RESILIENCE**  
The power of reflective eJournals

**12 FINDING THE PATH TO MENTAL FITNESS**  
From languishing to flourishing

**15 EMOTIONAL REFUGE**  
Holistic safety for those forced to flee their homes

**18 IN CONVERSATION WITH NIC BEECH**  
The Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University on campus well-being

**22 MINDFULNESS IN THE CLASSROOM**  
How are you feeling today?

**25 EAIE COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: STEPHANIE GRIFFITHS**  
Meet the winner of the 2022 EAIE Award for Outstanding Contribution

**26 STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE**  
What's an international officer to do?

**28 WELL-BEING THROUGH COACHING**  
Blurring the boundary between 'cultural' and 'personal'

**31 THE RISING TIDE OF VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH**  
New normal or fading fad?

**34 INCLUSIVE SERVICES AND SAFE SPACES**  
Navigating a world of complexity

**38 HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROTTERDAM**  
Internationalisation in the host city of #EAIE2023

**41 EAIE BLOG SPOT**

**43 CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

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## 06

“Is it realistic to expect students to develop an ‘optimistic explanatory style’ in the middle of a psychological perfect storm?”

HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THRIVE

## 18

“Everything comes back to the idea of belonging to a diverse community, with fewer and more porous boundaries”

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
NIC BEECH



## 26

“We can help a lot just by knowing our target group and helping them to help themselves – including by seeking psychological counselling”

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE



## 34

“Support offered to students has to be backed up by genuine actions and appropriate budget allocations, rather than merely paying lip service”

INCLUSIVE SERVICES  
AND SAFE SPACES



# EDITORIAL

Well-being in higher education is not a new topic, and the EAIE has been actively supporting discussion and professional development on student advising and counselling within its community for the last decade. Indeed, the Spring 2012 edition of *Forum* looked closely at the student experience and the mental health of international and mobile students in particular. More recently, two *Pathways to Practice* e-publications have offered practical and easily implementable ideas on related topics – ‘Supporting international doctoral students’ (August 2020) and ‘Fostering positive coping and resilience among international students’ (November 2021).

However, COVID-19 has shone a much brighter spotlight on the well-being of both students and staff, not to mention the many other stakeholders and community members who support the work of our institutions. In that context, as we continue to re-build our lives and our institutions from the personal and professional challenges of the global pandemic, it is timely to re-assess what is meant by well-being in an international education context, how institutions are responding to changing needs, and whether we’re doing okay.

The Summer 2023 issue of *Forum* looks at well-being from a number of perspectives, essentially asking how higher education institutions can enable environments that foster health and wellness among students and staff in an international context. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the ways in which international experiences themselves can be leveraged to facilitate emotional resilience, recognising that the challenges of an international

experience are exactly what fuels the kind of transformative learning that is at the heart of internationalisation.

As such, the various articles in this edition focus on the different actors in relation to well-being – be it a counselling service or the international office – or on the collective responsibility to foster a healthy campus environment. Meanwhile, others look at new mechanisms to provide mental health support online, and the future of this form of service delivery post-pandemic. Throughout, these articles consider the boundaries between culture and personal well-being, and what it means to be displaced temporarily or permanently, with tips and guidance on how to leverage international experiences to secure mental fitness.

I am delighted that Prof Nic Beech, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University in the United Kingdom, agreed to be interviewed for this issue. Prof Beech took up his current position in February 2020 and cut his teeth in the leadership and management of Middlesex University at a time of massive upheaval for staff and students. Appointed recently as a Commissioner for the UK’s International Higher Education Commission, it is fascinating to read of Prof Beech’s tactical responses to well-being concerns at his institution and, in particular, his advocacy of co-leadership with students in this space, ensuring that students and staff are engaged in a really human way with each other.

Also included in this edition is a profile of Stephanie Griffiths, who received the 2022 EAIE Award for Outstanding Contribution in recognition of her important contributions to supporting international education by ensuring that the



students and staff within our institutions can thrive. Having worked in the field of psychological counselling for over 30 years at King’s College London, Stephanie is now an intercultural consultant/trainer at her own intercultural consultancy for higher education institutions. She has developed several programmes of outreach and training, with the aim of enabling home and international students, academics and frontline administrative staff to be trained in the psychological pressures that they may encounter, particularly post-pandemic.

I am pleased that this edition of *Forum* makes a further contribution to the EAIE’s longstanding focus on well-being in international education, and I hope that it will help frame further discussion among EAIE members. With thanks to the authors and to Queenie Lam on the EAIE Publications Committee, who joined me in reviewing submissions for this issue.

I hope that you enjoy reading this edition of *Forum*.

— DOUGLAS PROCTOR, EDITOR  
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# CONTRIBUTORS

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Having been an international student in both the US and Germany, Jessica understands the challenges and opportunities that international students face. Her hobbies include enjoying 'coffee culture', yoga and travel.

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Kieran's background is in English for Academic Purposes. He has lived in Ireland, Spain and the UK before settling down in Amsterdam.

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Danny often says that while he was born in Costa Rica, he was "born an adult in South Africa" while studying abroad in Cape Town. In his work, he designs experiential learning and cross-cultural experiences as therapeutic tools for 'lost seekers'.

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Heather is a psychologist and educational administrator with over two decades of experience. She is also a certified yoga instructor who loves adopting pets, dancing and reading nerdy nonfiction books.

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Anna's passion for international education started with her own educational experiences in Poland and the United States. Outside work, her interests include travel and movies.

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# HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THRIVE

Student mental health and well-being has climbed to the top of the agenda for higher education in recent years, and rightfully so. Indeed, those of us who work with international students are keenly aware that students far from home are exposed to all the same stressors exacerbating mental health issues among their peers, and then some. But what if higher education institutions focused on not only helping international students survive, but enabling them to thrive?

Most conversations about international student well-being revolve around students' capacity to adapt, study and successfully integrate abroad. When international students manage their studies, develop friendships, comfortably speak the host language and overcome the hazards of their first winter abroad, everyone breathes a sigh of relief. However, there is much more to life than adjusting, managing, adapting and even integrating. What most international students really want is to stand out and live a bigger life abroad. Otherwise, they would have stayed in their home countries instead of challenging themselves.

It can therefore be argued that what most international students really want is to **thrive** in life. According to researcher Laurie Schreiner, we are not talking about a personality trait but rather a set of psychosocial characteristics that are interchangeable and can be influenced through interventions and a supportive environment.<sup>1</sup> In her research, Schreiner has concluded that thriving students experience transitions as opportunities for personal growth. But for this to happen, they need the support of others who are thriving and they need to feel that they are part of a community that enhances their sense of belonging and competency.

To thrive as a student matters, because it leads to intellectual, social and emotional engagement, which promotes an experience of psychological well-being that allows students to gain maximum benefit from their academic years, creating a "graduation persistence" that moves students forward no matter what comes their way.<sup>2</sup>



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**OPTIMISM**

Schreiner argues that students who thrive tend to have an “optimistic explanatory style”, meaning they hold positive and proactive perspectives on life and keep going in the face of challenges, even if their progress is slow or difficult. Thriving students engage with challenges (as opposed to avoiding them),

of being caused by one’s flaws.<sup>3</sup> In the case of international students – who struggle with culture shock, acculturation stress, uncertainty, loss of control, anxiety and homesickness – is it realistic to expect them to develop an optimistic explanatory style in the middle of a psychological perfect storm? Positive psychologists say it is possible, but only

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### Is it realistic to expect students to develop an ‘optimistic explanatory style’ in the middle of a psychological perfect storm?

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take the initiative, seek information and reframe challenging situations, looking for the lessons learned in the face of mistakes and all the while retaining a sense of humour.

Martin Seligman argues that a key factor in developing an optimistic mindset is to see setbacks as temporary and as the result of a particular situation instead

if they are provided with the necessary tools as soon as they begin their studies.

Timely ‘positive interventions’ for first-year students can make a big difference. For example, Schreiner proposes three specific practices, supported by research, that can have a lasting effect, which are presented and adapted here for international students:

**1. Equipping students with the right mindset**

As international students approach a new and unfamiliar environment, feelings of having little control or a sense of inadequacy can emerge. It is crucial to provide orientation sessions with the involvement of peer leaders who can talk about how they dealt with events in their first year of study abroad. The aim is to offer a brief lesson on the importance of one’s ‘attributional style’. For example, peers could explain how they used to view life at the very beginning of their international experience, pointing out mistakes or misinterpretations they made, then go on to describe how their views changed and what actions they’ve taken to be more successful. In this way, they could model to incoming students how making an effort and having a strategy opens the door for optimistic thoughts at a very crucial point of their academic journey.



## 2. Helping students envision success

Schreiner points to interventions designed by psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius around the concept of the “possible self”, or an individual’s idea of what they might become in the future and would like to become. From there, the concept of visualising the “best possible self” was introduced. Research has demonstrated that this can lead to positive emotions and support actions aimed at reaching one’s goals. Helping students reflect upon their best possible selves at the start of their studies is a positive intervention that universities can make.

Researchers Layous, Nelson and Lyubomirsky asked university students to engage in writing about their best possible selves in the following way: “Now, write down a goal (or goals) you think you might want to attain that will help you achieve your best possible self that you just described. Sometimes long-term goals seem overwhelming or out of your reach. But every journey begins with just a single step. Think about taking baby steps towards your long-term goal (or goals). A baby step could be as simple as proactively seeking information you need or talking to someone who may be able to guide you. Defining the next baby step you need to take to get a little closer towards your goal is a great way to get going with the journey without worrying too much about the length of the road.”<sup>4</sup>

Their study found that proactively thinking about best possible selves significantly boosted students’ positivity, flow and feelings of connection, both online and in person.

## 3. Helping students apply personal strengths

Schreiner argues that one of the major contributions of positive psychology to higher education is the emphasis on building on one’s strengths to address life challenges. Unfortunately, support for international students tends to focus on what they lack or need rather than on

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One of the major contributions of positive psychology to higher education is the emphasis on building on one’s strengths to address life challenges

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what they bring to the table. However, when students’ talents are identified early, it communicates that they have something to contribute to their learning environment that is also valuable to others, serving as a confirmation of their ability to succeed.

In this sense, another well-known positive psychologist, Barbara Fredrickson, points out that “people who have every day the opportunity to do what they do best – to act on their strengths – are far more likely to flourish”.<sup>5</sup> So what can raise awareness among international students about their capabilities? For starters, we can invite them to think about their strengths in a deeper way, providing self-exploration tools such as the VIA Survey of Character Strengths.<sup>6</sup> This is a

free self-assessment tool that offers personalised reports listing participants’ best personal qualities.

## THRIVING HUBS

To conclude, support for international students’ needs must go beyond helping with adaptation. We must provide tools for students to thrive and think big if we want to see them live their best lives abroad.

Creating an environment where international students thrive is an intentional practice, informed by research and institutional commitment. Maybe it’s time for universities to become ‘thriving’ hubs that support resilient happiness, instead of priming international and exchange students with modest expectations.

—JESSICA PRICE

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# REFLECTION A PATHWAY TO RESILIENCE

International experiences are a double-edged sword: the academic and personal challenges they entail can be highly stressful, but those same challenges can also foster the kind of resilience that enables students to overcome these and other challenges in the future. One programme at a higher education institution in the Netherlands is using reflective eJournals as a way to facilitate that kind of resilience and to make sure that ‘international’ is more than just a nice word. ▶

It will come as no surprise to learn that international students are particularly prone to mental health issues, with a recent survey in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup> identifying a majority (59%) of international students suffering from mental health concerns. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a responsibility to foster positive mental health and well-being among the student body, but international students in particular are subject to a unique set of stressors, as well as being impacted by varied cultural perspectives and attitudes. This requires an approach that highlights the importance of nurturing mental well-being, while also guiding students in developing coping strategies to facilitate success within high-pressure academic and career environments.

#### DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

Resilience has become an oft-repeated feature of university strategy over the past few years, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated challenges faced by learners. There is no universal definition of resilience, but it often refers to a student's ability to react dynamically and adapt to challenging experiences they encounter. A crucial feature is to enable a learner to gain the competences to identify and adapt to challenges independently, equipping them with the skills to positively deal with not only educational challenges, but also social, mental, and emotional trials. This has a positive correlation with enabling learner success in both the academic sphere and their future careers.

While there are various methods of fostering resilience, such as through well-being programmes and coaching initiatives, there is a growing attempt to embed

it within curricular delivery. Internationalisation policies, particularly those linked to Internationalisation at Home, can enable the development of these personal and intra-personal skills and competences by embedding them within the delivery of learning and teaching within curriculum.

#### THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCES

A key aim of internationalisation policies, particularly within the Netherlands, is to enable the development of the key skills and competences to enable learner success in both the internationalised learning environment and the international knowledge economy. Nuffic, the national body associated with internationalisation of higher education within the Netherlands, has produced an international competence framework<sup>2</sup> aimed at enabling HEIs to map competence development suitable for an internationalised study environment,

Such pathway programmes act as a bridge between not only secondary and tertiary education, but also between the international learners' home and host countries. The overarching aim is to guide students in developing the skills to navigate both academic and personal challenges independently and to allow students the opportunity to recognise and foster the competences enabled by an internationally-oriented education.

#### THE REFLECTIVE EJOURNAL

The benefits of reflective practice are well known, particularly within professional contexts, but it is also considered relevant to university students, with reflection and self-reflection equipping learners with effective tools to develop the competences relevant to their study and professional environments. To develop learners as reflective practitioners then, it is important to facilitate *active* reflection, where

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## The overarching aim is to guide students in developing the skills to navigate both academic and personal challenges independently

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and one of the three main areas is the development of 'personal qualities'. These range from a critical attitude to entrepreneurial skills but, crucially, also include qualities linked to positive well-being such as resilience, tolerance to stress, empathy and reflexivity.

This framework of international competence formed the basis for the development of a reflective eJournal that was integrated into the academic and pastoral delivery within an international pathway programme at the Holland International Study Centre in the Netherlands.

learners not only engage with the theory of reflective practice but also participate in reflection tasks on the learning, teaching and assessments they experience within a course.

The purpose of the eJournal is to allow students to participate in guided reflective tasks, with a scaffolded framework of activities scheduled throughout the year in their academic modules. This ensures that there is a coherent and sustained focus on the importance of developing relevant competences throughout the programme, while also guiding learners who are in the

first stages of their tertiary careers. The independent work learners complete in their eJournal is coupled with in-person small group tutorials with an instructor who facilitates active discussion and sharing of experiences.

The range of discussions depends on the discipline of the learners, with particular competences more relevant to some

in active reflection on a range of academic and personal competences unique to the international study and work environment. A key element is to ensure that both the teaching and professional services have enough time, training and guidance to ensure active engagement and proactivity across the teaching body. This helps to ensure a unified approach across

positive mental health and well-being. By integrating the international competence framework within the curriculum provision of the international pathway programme, positive personal qualities such as resilience and empathy are embedded and prioritised. Reflection then allows students to identify areas in their own lived experience where they are already demonstrating these but, crucially, where they can apply coping strategies to improve their learning and academic success. Coupled with a strong and proactive support system that students can access easily, this ensures international students have the support needed to develop their own well-being and resilience, equipping them for the globalised and sometimes hectic world around them.

— KIERAN MCGRANE

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## It is valuable to ensure that *international* is more than just a word, but rather a set of clear and precise actions

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areas of study as Nuffic's competence dashboard demonstrates. However, a unifying theme within all academic disciplines is the focus on developing students' personal qualities associated with fostering positive mental health and well-being. By framing these personal qualities in the same way as the more traditional knowledge-based competence, students from a variety of different cultures are able to see the importance attached to personal aspects that they might not have with a more 'hands-off' approach. These group discussions also provide support for students who encounter difficulties or challenges with their state of mental health to be directed to the proper channels and resources in a timely manner.

By facilitating small group discussions on the challenges and expectations they face, the eJournal initiative also enables international students and those studying in international or intercultural environments to develop a sense of community and empowerment through a shared experience.

### ENABLING SUCCESS

In initiating the reflective eJournal, the purpose was to enable learners to engage

the board and students benefit from a project that is sustainable and supported by the faculty. In addition to this, clear and coherent training should be provided to students as to how to use the eJournal tool from the very beginning.

Within a small institution there is more flexibility to respond in an innovative manner while receiving regular feedback on the project from both staff and students. Larger institutions with a wider range of disciplinary study would need to ensure appropriate feedback mechanisms are in place and an approach that ensures the eventual competency framework used is suitable for the disciplinary focus of particular courses. There is also healthy competition from various other competence frameworks, such as the EU DigComp<sup>3</sup>, but it is valuable, particularly within internationally-oriented HEIs, to ensure that the *international* is more than just a word, but rather a set of clear and precise actions that can bring about the best benefits of internationalisation for both students and staff.

Internationalisation policies enable the integration of intercultural and interpersonal skills that help learners develop

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# FINDING THE PATH TO MENTAL FITNESS

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In the midst of increasing numbers of students struggling with significant mental health challenges, it's easy to lose sight of the even greater number of youths who are 'languishing': they're not in acute danger yet, but they could be soon if we don't act. Thoughtfully-delivered international experiences, embedded in a framework that puts student well-being at the centre, might be just what the doctor ordered to help students reach a state of mental fitness.



**A**t a time when mental health issues are on the rise and guided opportunities to build mental fitness are scarce, international educators are under increasing pressure to prepare students for what lies beyond their university, be it a continued educational journey or employment.

Although technological advances have increased access to education and helped students overcome various challenges, tech has also exacerbated anxiety and stress via social media pressures and a flood of information, conflicting ‘facts’ and competing propaganda. They need to self-educate quickly to adapt to tech advances, and they are expected to exert higher levels of agency while often receiving less real-world preparation.

#### LANGUISHING YOUTH

During COVID-19 lockdowns, students experienced all of these dynamics without the opportunity to travel, socialise and build crucial developmental skills needed for maturation.

As a result, many young adults are ‘doing OK’ and are generally ‘functional’ but describe their life as stressful and plagued with mental fatigue and emotional burnout. In 2021, author Adam Grant called this “languishing”, which is characterised by a sense of emptiness, stagnation, numbness and difficulty in accessing feelings of joy and satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Languishing is not a mental illness, but it greatly increases the risk of developing a major depressive disorder.<sup>2</sup>

#### GUIDED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Higher education institutions cannot rid the world of mental illness, but they can focus on mental fitness as an empowering way to help students thrive. While mental illness is a risk that requires a psychotherapist, mental fitness is a resilience factor better gained from guided learning experiences.<sup>3</sup>

If framed and implemented properly, experiential international education can be instrumental in supporting languishing students by challenging their openness and adaptability and inviting them to be reflective and develop more robust personal narratives. It can also support the development of maturity,

confidence and purpose, as well as resilience, creative problem-solving, cognitive complexity and divergent thinking.

By travelling to new destinations and living and studying abroad, students are inherently conquering several dimensions of physical, mental and emotional wellness via cultural immersion, homestays, community volunteering, language development, exploring new activities and trying new things.

However, sending students abroad without the necessary support can cause more harm than good. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development research noted that learning is most effective when the learner is guided outside their comfort zone just enough to be alert and curious about novelty, without being overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, students thrive not when left alone but when guided by skilled educators or peers.

#### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

What tools exist to support educators in this style of youth development? One coaching framework is Recio and Tracy’s Supportive Immersion Theory, which employs empathetic connection, collaborative empowerment and process-based scaffolding.<sup>5</sup> The framework helps develop PROPS skills, meaning students become:

- **Proactive** in finding their purpose
- **Resilient** in times of struggle
- **Open** and collaborative
- Creative in **problem-solving**
- Skilled at **self-governance**

These skills are all developed through international education experiences, which can lead the way in filling maturation gaps as well as taking students from languishing to flourishing.

One Supportive Immersion Theory study abroad participant in 2020 expressed their growth in resilience as follows: “Having to deal with uncomfortable situations really gave me a new perspective on how I need to focus on my priorities and how much the short-term discomforts are worth it in the long term.”<sup>6</sup> Another outlined new skills in flexibility, adaptability and cognitive complexity: “Spending

time with people from a different culture, living with them and becoming their friend has made me realise that my way is not always the way.”<sup>7</sup> These reflections represent mental fitness and PROPS skill development achieved through intentional international education.

#### PROGRAMMES TO SUPPORT MENTAL FITNESS

There are programmes that specialise in supporting participants with diagnosed psychological disorders (therapeutic young adult programmes) and there are others that specialise in the ‘languishing’ population (intentional international education programmes). While the latter do not specifically focus on mental health, they can support mental fitness if they employ evidence-based coaching methodologies. Doing so may help their participants be better positioned to not only avoid mental illness in the future but also flourish on their way to adulthood.

Higher education institutions work hard to foster wellness on their own campuses, but sometimes getting away from that campus is what students need most in order to test and build their resilience. Most study abroad experiences will be transformative for students, but certain programmes can intentionally incorporate mental health and sustainable living into the fabric of the course itself. Here are some essential components to keep in mind if you want to build or find such programmes:

- **Thorough admissions processes.** Admissions vetting systems should be used to determine whether a student is ready for an international programme, while counsellors and educational specialists should be consulted to

determine the level of support a student needs. In this way, students are set up for success by being placed within their Zone of Proximal Development.

- **Pre-enrolment and ongoing assessment.** Personality testing, surveys and vocational testing can be used to help clarify personal and professional paths and ongoing support needs. You can use a framework such as Pathfinder’s Nine Dimensions of Healthy Living to co-create a goal plan with students, helping them visualise, reflect on and revise their goals and integrate their experiences into their chosen path.<sup>8</sup>
- **Intentional frameworks.** Evidence-based methodological frameworks should be used that fit the ethos and local culture of the international education programme. For example, the Pathfinder study abroad programme harnesses Costa Rica’s cultural focus on happiness, pure living and ecological sustainability to help develop healthy lifestyles.
- **Faculty training.** It is not necessary for personnel to be clinical psychologists to support mental fitness. Life coaching can impact short- and long-term outcomes for study abroad participants. Likewise, administrators can develop specific staff training modules to support coaching that aligns with the values and purpose of the programme. In addition, programmes must care for the carers and provide ample opportunities for faculty support, coaching and teamwork so that the mentors are mentally fit to do their work.

With the COVID-19 pandemic subsiding and international travel resuming,

programmes have an opportunity to use powerful international education opportunities as rites of passage to support students’ mental fitness. Various support tools can help our industry to refine study abroad admissions processes, implement ongoing assessments, enhance faculty training and adopt frameworks that align with a programme and cultural guiding principles. This approach can support languishing students in finding their path to flourishing both personally and professionally.

— DANNY RECIO & HEATHER TRACY

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# EMOTIONAL REFUGE

While the choice to study abroad can be one that leads to manifold positive mental health outcomes, forced migration is a different case altogether. For students and scholars forced to flee conflict zones or repressive states, the universities where they seek asylum abroad are neatly positioned to provide not only an academic home, but also a place of emotional safety. ▶



On the one hand, international mobility is a highly enriching learning experience that can provide exceptional academic and life opportunities. On the other hand, it can entail a high level of uncertainty and risk. This is especially true in the case of forced migration of students and researchers who are fleeing war-affected areas, who

and simplified administrative procedures, exemption from registration and tuition fees, financial support, free legal services, free psychological support, translation services and assistance with accommodation.

Another project, part of a Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange initiative called ‘Solidarity with

of services provided by university units such as psychological support centres, academic legal clinics, career centres, international relations offices, welcome points, ombudsperson offices, offices for people with disabilities and mentoring programmes.

#### EUROPEAN COOPERATION

Another programme offered as part of the Solidarity with Ukraine initiative puts the stress on cooperation with European Universities Initiative alliances, facilitating online courses and professional and personal development workshops, including for those who cannot leave Ukraine (such as men between 18 and 60, people with disabilities and people with complicated family situations). For example, the University of Warsaw has developed a project whose aim is to create flexible academic and career paths, adjusted to personal preferences and the requirements of the labour market. In this way, participants have access to the international community and can develop their skills without leaving their country.

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## The idea was to create a safe, friendly environment to enable Ukrainian students and researchers to adapt to the new situation

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have experienced terror and trauma and who are not necessarily prepared for life and studies in a foreign country.

#### POLISH PROGRAMMES

Ukrainian students and researchers were forced to flee their country to protect their lives after Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. They were looking for educational opportunities in their host countries and needed a range of supportive actions: academic, practical, legal, financial and psychological.

To meet these needs, Polish universities prepared a wide variety of educational activities and other forms of support to ensure adaptation and emotional well-being. For example, the University of Warsaw took measures to tailor its offerings to the needs of Ukrainian students and researchers so that they could start activities during the semester and continue their studies or work on their own research projects. The university is offering academic supervision, flexible

Ukraine’, involved a selection of Polish language and adaptation courses, covering psychoeducation, career planning, personal goal setting, communication in an intercultural environment, stress management and mindfulness. The idea was to create a safe, friendly environment to enable Ukrainian students and researchers to adapt to the new situation and plan their educational path or career in a flexible way. Participants could take time to consider the available options

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## Participation had a positive effect on their self-confidence in a new environment and allowed them to better adapt to life and studies in Poland

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and opportunities while learning Polish, improving their English skills and establishing valuable contacts. At the same time, all incoming students, researchers and staff from Ukraine were encouraged to take advantage of a wide range

#### POSITIVE FEEDBACK

After the war broke out, higher education institutions in the whole of Europe made efforts to support Ukrainian students, researchers and staff by providing versatile educational, financial and emotional



assistance. The first results prove that the recipients of these programmes have benefited from them and appreciate their outcomes. In a questionnaire answered by the participants of summer courses offered by the University of Warsaw, 93% said their overall satisfaction was very high or high and that their expectations had been met.

#### COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

My conclusion from the work done so far is that universities should not separate academic programmes from other forms of support, including a focus on emotional well-being. In these trying times, it is especially important that higher education institutions take care of this aspect of the lives of their students, researchers

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## Universities should not separate academic programmes from other forms of support, including a focus on emotional well-being

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They learned some Polish and English and they valued the professionalism of the lecturers, the interesting content of the courses, the creative approach, the innovative methods of teaching and the possibility to interact with other participants in an international environment. Respondents praised the friendly atmosphere and multi-level support. Some of them mentioned that participation had a positive effect on their self-confidence in a new environment and allowed them to better adapt to life and studies in Poland.

To quote one participant: “Every-thing was well organised. The lecturers were trustworthy and positive and treated the students with respect.” Another student concluded: “What I liked the most was the atmosphere and the way every lecturer was trying to teach us. I acquired a lot of knowledge which will be helpful in my life. I think that thanks to this course, one can feel more confident in a new environment. I would very much like to participate in this course one more time.”

and staff, including in relation to the university’s international activities.

The war in Ukraine has brought new challenges and we are facing tragic situations and high-level risks on an everyday basis. Academic communities can continue to show their empathy and solidarity by offering many different forms of support to help Ukrainian students, researchers and staff survive and pursue their academic, professional and personal goals despite the terror of war.

—ANNA SADECKA



IN CONVERSATION WITH

**NIC  
BEECH**

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JACOB GIBBONS  
EAIE

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In his role as Vice-Chancellor at Middlesex University in the United Kingdom, Prof Nic Beech has had a bird's-eye view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises confronting the higher education sector in recent years. With his research background in the study of identity, diversity, change leadership and learning, he's developed a keen eye for the human aspect of what's going on within the walls of the university and the many challenges students and staff face on a daily basis.

**Before the global pandemic, there was much discussion about a crisis of mental health among students, and – in response to COVID-19 – that conversation now encompasses both staff and students in the higher education sector. As the Vice-Chancellor of a UK university, what are your initial reflections on the well-being of your campus and broader community?**

**NB:** The charity Student Minds conducted a really good survey of students across the UK during and after the pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and there was a notable upturn in the number of people reporting mental health challenges, some of which are towards the clinical end of the spectrum. But alongside that, I think

with a higher degree of concern and worry about the world as a whole, in terms of the pandemic but also the environment, sustainability, financial challenges and conflicts around the world.

All of these dynamics provide a context where thoughtful students who want to make a difference in the world are seeing that getting harder to do. Alongside that, HEI staff, of course, have also been through an enormous struggle, moving from ways of working that they were confident in, to suddenly having to teach online and facilitate students in new ways.

This is why it's important to create a sense of belonging to a diverse community. That means that

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**We need to think carefully about how we work as co-leaders *with* students, and how we ensure that students and staff are engaged in a really human way with each other**

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there are a lot of well-being and welfare issues – as opposed to mental illness *per se* – which also produce stress and anxiety that, if you don't engage with them in the right sort of way, can result in all sorts of negative outcomes for students.

The pandemic did heighten this stress and anxiety, with people feeling more isolated, in combination

we need to think carefully about how we work as co-leaders, *with* students, rather than just doing things for them, and how we ensure that students and staff are engaged in a really human way with each other. The pandemic gave us a lot of challenges, but it also gave us that opportunity to ask how human we are as university.

**For Middlesex University, have you introduced or nurtured particular initiatives which foster health and wellness among students and staff? If so, what were the drivers for those initiatives? And how successful have they been?**

**NB:** Over the last three years or so, student leaders have had mental health and well-being near the top of their agenda, and that's really helped us in a whole range of ways in terms of co-designing student participation. Co-leadership for us is really crucial, and they have taken that all the way through the university:

post-pandemic hybrid forms of working more of a struggle, we paired them up with students whose technology skills were pretty advanced, and they helped staff build the confidence they needed.

All of this comes back to the idea of belonging to a diverse community, with fewer and more porous boundaries. We don't want to say, "you're a lecturer, so you have to know everything." Actually, you're a lecturer who's a human being. This kind of co-leadership and bottom-up approach is a crucial part of what we do around mental health and well-being.

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## Everything comes back to the idea of belonging to a diverse community, with fewer and more porous boundaries

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in our Academic Board, which is our senior academic committee, we now have student-led sessions every time we meet. The students have led several sessions around mental health and well-being there, as well as with our Board of Governors. We try to make sure these student voices are leading the discussion in our governance structure.

One of the things that I love that the students here at Middlesex University did brilliantly was the idea of being 'digital buddies' to staff transitioning to hybrid teaching. In some cases, this transition happened quite neatly, but there are a lot of areas where staff needed and deserved help to make that shift. Some staff are really quite tech savvy, but some others (and I'm one of them) are a bit behind the curve. So, for those who found the

**Thinking particularly about the international dimensions of higher education, it is often claimed that international experiences (for students and staff) support greater emotional resilience. What are your views on this? And do you know of specific culturally appropriate interventions introduced by higher education institutions to support positive coping and resilience in an international context?**

**NB:** We re-worked our strategy at Middlesex a couple of years ago, and one of the crucial things in that was redefining ourselves as a 'global family', which is a very deliberate phraseology. We have 38,000 students, roughly half of whom are on our London campus, and then we have fantastic campuses in Dubai and in Mauritius, as well as very big partnerships in Europe. Altogether, roughly

half of our students are studying outside the UK, and the reason we use the word 'family' is that we all have a shared purpose. We have a shared set of values, but there's quite a lot of differences between us, and these differences are at the heart of learning experiences which are really transformational – coming to understand the perspective of people from quite different backgrounds and countries.

This brings us back to the question of belonging. How do people feel part of the community? We have a transition programme to try and make sure that people coming to London really feel part of it, understand some of the fundamentals of how you navigate life in London, everything from banking to accommodation. We try to make sure that we don't end up with students who are somewhat isolated or not part of the big family, and that also includes the way that we would talk to our UK students. We see them as being global and connected too. We do the same at our Dubai campus, and in Mauritius.

Just as one example, on International Sports Day, we had teams in our different campuses competing and they were very inclusive teams: the teams were not London playing against Mauritius or Dubai. They were instead the 'red team', the 'blue team' and the 'green team', and each included students from across the world, as well as a mix of professional and academic staff members. This kind of mixed activity can instil a sense that there is this global community that you're joining, where you're just being people with each other.



**What impact does an inclusive campus environment (or lack thereof) have on the mental health of staff and students? And can you recommend best practice inclusion measures that bolster the mental health and well-being of a university community?**

**NB:** I think you have to come at this from multiple directions: from the top down, as well as from the bottom up, and from professional as well as academic and student-led activities. We've been a part of Universities UK's 'Changing the culture' initiative for over five years now, and a lot of that involves thinking about challenges things like harassment, discrimination, bullying, exclusion or other unfair practises in universities that end up dividing people. We know that all these things happen in society all the

often much more receptive. In line with that thinking, some of our students produced a short film<sup>2</sup> around spiking and its consequences, and honestly the film is just brilliant. It's not very long, but it's hugely impactful and it has now been picked up and is being used across the country.

We must encourage more initiatives like this which foster a culture in which we have well-being, care, inclusion and belonging as a thread that runs through everything. It needs to be part of your curriculum, your extracurricular activities and the campus culture.

**You have been nominated as a Commissioner for the recently established International Higher Education Commission in the UK. This Commission will develop recommendations for a new**

In general, the Commission is looking at the significant contribution that international students make to education, economy and society more broadly. There are changing patterns in where international students in the UK come from, a growth in taught postgraduate programmes and a concentration particularly in business and management and computer science. International students tend to do very well in their careers after university and they make a big contribution in business start-ups, so there is a very positive story to tell and we need to make sure this story is heard by the public as well as by students and staff.

1. <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/student-mental-health-in-a-pandemic.html>

2. <https://www.mdx.ac.uk/news/2022/09/mdx-students-campaign-film-raise-awareness-of-spiking>

## We must foster a culture in which we have well-being, care, inclusion and belonging as a thread that runs through everything

time, and universities are not immune, and therefore we need to work really proactively on those fronts.

One of the examples that I thought was really interesting in this area was the work on 'spiking', which refers to the practice of putting alcohol or drugs into another person's drink or their body without their knowledge or consent. When this happens, it's clearly a major problem. Of course, if staff talk to students and try to tell them not to do something, then that's received in one way – but if students talk to each other, then other students are

**International Education Strategy in your country. In the work of this Commission, what focus do you envisage on the well-being of students and staff (international and domestic)?**

**NB:** I'm really excited to be part of this group. One of the contributions that Middlesex is making is running some focus groups with international students, particularly around their role in governance and how well they are listened to. International students have a distinct experience and we are looking at how this can be better understood by universities.



# MINDFULNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

Students don't need to visit a monastery abroad to gain a little zen. Mindfulness Practices for Students in Society, a project funded by Erasmus+, is facilitating students' capacities to tackle emotional difficulties based on the idea that, if we want to make the world a better place, we've first got to get in touch with how we feel about ourselves and the world around us.

**H**ow are you feeling today? Yes, you, reading this article! How are you feeling right now? Happy with how your week is going? Worried about your workload? Fulfilled by having finished an important task? Safe, because you live in a country at peace? Worried about climate justice? All of these things at once and more?

You may wonder why these questions are being asked in a publication about higher education. The answer is simple: because they matter for the work of university professionals. Moreover, is it not fundamental for students to reflect on these questions too? If the ultimate goal of universities is to contribute to making the world a better place, one must first recognise and accept that there is (much) room for improvement. And this starts by reflecting on how one feels about oneself, others and finally the world.

This was the mindset in kicking off Mindfulness Practices for Students in Society (MP4s). The project, funded by Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education since 2021 and until 2024, aims to support students in tackling their emotional difficulties through mindfulness practices and training, fostering a compassionate care of self, others and the planet within higher education institutions. The project consortium consists of four European higher education institutions, one vocational training centre in Italy,



Image: Shutterstock

two non-governmental organisations in Portugal and Turkey, and one network of universities based in Belgium.

#### WHY MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness can be described as the ability to be fully present by being aware of one's thoughts, feelings and body and the surrounding environment. As a subject and guiding principle in learning environments, mindfulness has been a significant topic of research in recent decades, showing the need for practical information on how it can best be implemented and how it benefits students, teachers and the wider community.

The premise of our project is to build students' skills in paying attention to thoughts and experiences (the practice of mindfulness), while introducing relevant information from the psychological and social sciences on behaviour. The objective

is that mindfulness can be used as a part of curricula to promote successful inclusive education for students, including those with special needs. For teachers, faculty members and staff and other stakeholders (such as vocational and training centres, youth centres and local authorities), it will support them in creating inclusive learning environments where a sense of mutual support is nurtured.

the SIT4PLANET customisable syllabus, a guiding document to enable university stakeholders to weave mindful practices into any course or campus activity. This is the peak of a joint effort from all partners that started with deep, cross-sector, state-of-the-art research on students' emotional challenges and concerns, followed by Europe-wide mapping of the main challenges and concerns.

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**Mindfulness can be described as the ability to be fully present by being aware of one's thoughts, feelings and body and the surrounding environment**

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#### MINDFUL, HANDS FULL

Halfway through the project, the consortium is slowly and steadily preparing to enter the final and most important stage:

Simultaneously, we have been training university ambassadors on care, curiosity, acceptance, trust, not judging, not striving and letting go. Some activities have been



exclusively dedicated to contact with the environment and nature, which is a cornerstone of the project. We have also been successful in collecting information on existing practices of mindfulness in education conducted in Europe. With certified

empowering students with more compassion thanks to mindful awareness resources, tools and practices. The consortium has plans for this body of work to live past the EU budgetary opportunity and eventually become a reference for classroom

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## Sharing your feelings is caring: for oneself, for others and for the planet

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mindfulness teachers in the consortium, a mindfulness toolbox for faculties and students is currently under construction to facilitate the journey towards engagement rooted in mindfulness before we create the core tool: the SIT4PLANET syllabus.

### ROOTS AND RETICENCE

Mindfulness is sometimes regarded with reticence and criticism, in part because of its association with Buddhism-related practices. If it is true that the main fundamentals are found in Buddhist teachings, the project partners stress that it would be reductive to limit mindfulness only to Buddhist precepts.

Much research has been done on the topic, confirming that mindfulness can actively contribute to a person's mental well-being, and it should be thought of in the context of the person practising it. The mindful practices to be woven into European university classes cannot fully replicate those done in the context of a Buddhist monastery. The consortium is also hopeful that successful outcomes of these practices will encourage other universities to jump on board.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

MP4s is a collective effort to accelerate the climate and social transition by

practice. Public policy recommendations will be written in order to promote the inclusion of mindfulness practices in curricula and all facets of academic life.

But beyond classroom practice, the consortium is striving to empower mindfulness as a creative resource for social and climate justice in our societies, inside and outside university walls. Long-term ambitions include enhancing evidence of the benefits of mindfulness through research and successful implementation, exploring other mindfulness practices that might enhance the student experience, and expanding the use of mindfulness as a learning resource to other levels of education, areas of society and problems.

### SHARING IS CARING

There is an urgent need to enable students to mindfully face current and upcoming challenges and support them in dealing with strong emotions such as eco-anxiety, fear of others, work overload stress and anxiety about the future. Understanding how people feel has often proven to be a good exercise before taking any actions or decisions, and universities are now open to creating the spaces and timing for those thoughts and feelings to be heard.

Of course, mindfulness is not the only answer for challenges in well-being and mental health, but it has proven to be an effective resource. All in all, sharing your feelings is caring: for oneself, for others and for the planet.

So, really, how are you feeling today?

— ALEXANDRA DUARTE & LAURA COLÒ

This article is written in memory of Nathalie Schnuriger, the founder of the MP4s project, who passed away on January 3, 2023. Her willingness to help others and her kind-hearted nature will be deeply missed.



Photo: courtesy of UnLaSalle



## EAIE COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

# Stephanie Griffiths

**MANY EAIE MEMBERS ARE ENGAGED IN MEANINGFUL WAYS WITH DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF 'WELL-BEING WITHOUT BORDERS'. ONE MEMBER OF OUR COMMUNITY WHO STANDS OUT IN THIS AREA IS STEPHANIE GRIFFITHS, WINNER OF THE 2022 EAIE AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION.**

Stephanie is an intercultural consultant/trainer at her own intercultural consultancy for higher education institutions, having recently retired from the position of Associate Director for Counselling and Mental Health Support at King's College London, after over 30 years working in the field of psychological counselling. In the course of her career, Stephanie has developed several programmes of outreach and training, with the aim of enabling home and international students, academics and frontline administrative staff to be trained in the psychological pressures that they may encounter. During the pandemic, Stephanie provided input to various EAIE events and resources on student well-being and mental health, and has proven to be a great source of knowledge on this topic.

In addition to serving as Chair of the EAIE Expert Community *Guidance and Counselling* and an EAIE Academy trainer for more than six years, Stephanie was presented



with last year's EAIE Award for Outstanding Contribution in recognition of her important work in supporting international education by ensuring that the students and staff within our institutions can thrive. The impact of her work can be felt both by the EAIE and by the international higher education sector as a whole.

# STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

If higher education institutions want to foster healthy environments, then every unit of the university must do its part. While on its face mental health may seem like an area that solely concerns student counsellors, the international office is ideally positioned to play a key role in supporting international students' well-being during their stay.

International offices typically do not offer psychological counselling, and our staff are rarely trained for this. Instead, there are specialised services within higher education or the public health system.

But referring international students to these services is not always simple, and international offices have to deal with many complex situations related to mental health. We experience the fears and desperation of students whose residence permits are expiring or whose parents lost everything in the war. And we need to communicate all options and their meaning to students – whose understanding of mental health issues is informed by previous experiences in a different culture and society – before sending anyone to psychological counselling.

Furthermore, we aim to provide a safe space to enable students to be honest with us and show their feelings of desperation. If we want to shed our responsibility for mental health and see our role as simply referring students to specialist services, should we instead foster a more

formal and distant atmosphere in order to avoid being confronted by mental health issues?

No. We have a big role to play in the mental health of international students and we must embrace it. At the international office of the University of Stuttgart, international students may contact us about more or less *any* issue they have. We see our core tasks and competences as the following:

1. Offering international students a space where they are seen, their experience is valued and their issues are taken seriously.
2. Offering information on and orientation within their new social and institutional environment and its logic, underlying principles, roles, norms and expectations.
3. Enabling and empowering international students to take the next step independently, and accompanying them on that next step if necessary.
4. Enabling international students to concentrate on their studies and graduate successfully



Illustration: Shutterstock

### THE DIFFERENCE WE CAN MAKE

Addressing mental health issues is integral to those tasks. We do not need to be trained therapists ourselves. Instead, we can help a lot just by knowing our target group and helping them to help themselves – including by seeking psychological counselling.

Often, it doesn't take much to make a difference. I remember a distressed international student sitting in my office in his first semester, collapsed and grey in the face while we discussed his options, including psychological counselling. The next week, he popped in at my office again to thank me. He told me I was the first person in Germany who had really listened to his experience. Now he saw that adjusting to a new culture was a lot of work and needed time. He decided to be more compassionate and patient with himself rather than trying too hard to excel in his studies all the time. He did not seek psychological counselling on that occasion, but he promised me he would do so if he felt bad again. He left with his head held high and smiling.

### HOW WE CAN MAKE IT

There are several steps you can take to improve how your international office handles mental health issues. The first is to gather extensive knowledge of the mental health services available to your students, both at your institution and elsewhere. This will help you guide students to support that fits their individual needs, and it will save them time and frustration in an already challenging situation. Initiate personal contact with colleagues at mental health services. If you know and trust them, the students will notice this and they are much more likely to accept help from them.

The role of your international office in relation to mental health must be well defined. Set guidelines for the transfer of students from the international office to other services and vice versa. Speaking of guidelines, you should also create a step-by-step plan for emergencies, especially for situations where a student expresses self-harming tendencies. Keep this guidance and the relevant emergency numbers close at hand and document each emer-

gency in line with legal requirements. Always share challenging student cases with a colleague, anonymously if needed. Consider establishing regular peer support sessions and external supervision.

Finally – and this brings us full circle to the fact that international office staff are rarely trained to handle mental health issues – consider enlarging your team's skills portfolio through continuing and further education in areas such as Mental Health First Aid, mediation and counselling. These measures make for great burnout prevention for staff members, too. If responsibilities are blurred and you lack support and structure, advising students can quickly become exhausting.

Approaching mental health issues in a structured manner and acquiring the skills needed does take some effort, but it's definitely worth it. We have a crucial role to play in student mental health – and we must not shirk that responsibility.

—ANU GRÄFIN ZU DOHNA

# WELL-BEING THROUGH COACHING

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Given their variety of different backgrounds, finding the right approach to supporting international students can be tricky. Coaching is a technique that not only cuts across cultural differences but even calls into question the very division we often make between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘personal’, and in so doing facilitates the kind of reflective and experiential learning that international mobility aspires to promote.

**F**or international students, maintaining social, physical, academic, spiritual and mental wellness while studying at host campuses can be challenging. Far from home, students often find that their usual sources and strategies for well-being – their relationships, landscapes, social activities and spiritual communities – are sharply absent. Familial pressure to be extraordinarily successful, to justify investments in education or to eventually be able to support those back home can also be very strong.

Forming close friendships in the cultural context of the host country, as well as understanding new academic and social cultures, can be slow-going. Making this even harder, support resources on campus are often difficult to access and frequently culturally inappropriate (and in the United States, linguistic differences are rarely mentioned or addressed). Loneliness, arguably at an all-time high since the pandemic but certainly also widespread beforehand, aggravates both stress and sadness.

On the campus side, universities are not unaware of this. They find themselves increasingly unable to keep up with demand as both everyday and acute forms of stress continue to rise among *all* their stakeholders – international students, domestic students, staff, faculty and leaders – none of whom have emerged from the pandemic unaffected and all of whom worry about the current state of the world. How can an institution support the well-being of international students, a vastly differentiated and transitory population, amid a rapidly-changing global setting?

#### CONVERSATION, ACTION AND AGENCY

While responses must come from multiple sites and fit into many different frameworks, I propose that a coaching approach, with its sensitivity or capacity to listen to difference, offers a particularly tailored, open and empowering way to support international students’ well-being. Coaching refers to a modality of conversation and a relationship in which the coach helps the other person discover what they want, who they want to be and how best to fulfil their own values, desires and vision, whether personal, professional or creative. It is experiential learning *par excellence* as it involves both reflection within the intimacy of the conversation and action in a world full of others.

It is also about agency, which for international students involves charting their way within a new university and amid the widespread prevalence of inequities, racism and xenophobia. Given its emphasis on drawing out the innate wisdom of the client, coaching provides a hospitable space for international students’ differences and unique ways of defining and seeking wellness. This support offers strategies for being well in the new environment in a way that demands neither full assimilation to the host culture nor rejection of that which is different.

#### FALSE BORDERS

Furthermore, coaching supplements intercultural work, and it is here that we find an opportunity to make the false ‘cultural/personal’ border more porous. While campuses frequently invest resources to build intercultural competencies (which are urgently needed

and still under-supported), these approaches can inadvertently underprivilege the personal dimension: the unique nature of each person's trajectory, inner state, goals, pressures and personality, which co-exists with their cultural identities.

Even when competency work includes affective qualities and processes, it does so through a cognitive lens and in a fairly pragmatic, even instrumentalist manner. The object of reflection is usually a cultural practice, a place, a thing or an encounter. We engineer a reframe based in *thinking*, which is vitally important in arresting ethnocentrism, yet we stop short of getting into the *being* realm of how an individual student is showing up, making sense of self and other and choosing their responses, and how well or unwell they may be feeling as they do so.

This is ironic, given that most of us in this field have had many similar cultural experiences. Encounters with difference throw us into what psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls a state of being "*en procès*" – which translates as both 'in process' and 'on trial'.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we evolve through encounters with people and things unlike ourselves ('in process'), and these encounters also put our sense of self into question ('on trial'): "What will I loosen, let go of, take in, open up to, retain or refuse?" These are questions in the individual's emotional and meaning-making arena that a coach can accompany them with because of the emphasis on deep listening and ability to allow the student's own answers to emerge.

#### CONSCIOUS CHOICES

Indeed, one of the things that makes coaching unique is that the coach does not mentor, advise or psychoanalyse but rather invites critical meaning-making

and decision-making on the part of the person being coached, thus aligning well with liberatory and critical pedagogies.

During a coaching process, the coach is keenly attuned to both obvious and highly subtle differences, seeking to understand the world from the student's position as a whole person, not just as a person of a particular culture. Through these conversations and moving through daily life in the new site, the student can begin to denaturalise their current, often unconscious ways of being and perceiving themselves and what is possible.

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## Because it is widely used in the tech sector and other professions at the executive level, coaching does not carry a mental health stigma

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This offers a direct but distinct parallel to what intercultural learning foments – the ability to see oneself as a cultural being and then gradually open up to other ways. When a student can suddenly see how they tend to make sense of and respond to things as a cultural being *and* as an individual through many other aspects of their nature as well, this too makes new approaches to life abroad possible. This awareness allows them to intentionally make choices about who they want to be in the context of new places and to move through these experiences from a position of greater groundedness and well-being.

#### HOLISTIC AND SCALABLE SUPPORT

Coaching offers two other noteworthy advantages. Because it is widely used in the tech sector and other professions at the executive level and is contextualised within professional development terms, coaching does not carry a mental health

stigma, which can be significant for students from particular cultural contexts. This orientation also aligns with their own professional goals and reasons for studying away in the first place. Second, coaching can be done in small groups and among peers, which may be more familiar and comfortable for some students, and this also scales well for resource-strained universities.

With the rising generation committed to taking on the challenges of creating a better world, it is imperative to find ways to protect and expand their sense of

purpose, meaning and agency – in other words, their wellness. Cultural awareness on its own does not necessarily signal personal integration and well-being, and this is where we need to place more attention. By dismantling some of our traditional binaries of cultural/personal and professional/personal, universities and global educators can serve students from a much more holistic vantage point and support them as they move forward in their trajectories. Coaching offers one especially amenable modality for doing this work.

— ANGELINA RODRÍGUEZ

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1. Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in poetic language* (M. Waller, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1974)

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# THE RISING TIDE OF VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH

The more ways higher education institutions can attend to their students' mental health needs, the better. Whereas before the pandemic virtual mental health services were a marginal activity or a stopgap measure, the post-pandemic context is one in which the value of technology-assisted counselling is becoming increasingly apparent. But is the rise of virtual mental health an already-fading fad, or part of the new normal? ▶



**B**efore the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual mental health services for students studying abroad were not completely unheard of, but certainly not entirely commonplace. Post-pandemic – with a trifecta of increasing acceptance of virtual services, increased demand for mental health support and a global shortage of mental health professionals – it is a timely topic for international educators to explore virtual mental health options for students abroad. In the field of international higher education, we have only just begun to consider many new complexities of virtual mental health within the study abroad context.

students are overwhelmingly accepting of a telehealth service for mental health when offered, and that it is simply part of our new norm. Steve Hopkins, as Senior Account Manager at CISI Cultural International Insurance, notes an increase in universities across the board in the United States reviewing virtual options for their suite of mental health services, a drastic contrast to the past where even disclosure of mental illness in itself was often a challenge.

The aforementioned experiences and observations of this article's authors are of course situated within regional particularities: McNamara notes the current

#### **IS VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH 'WORKING'?**

While some still opt for in-person appointments, McNamara finds that students enjoy, especially for mental health services, a session in the comfort and safety of their own chosen and easily-accessible space. From Fullick's perspective, virtual options prevent traffic delays and missed appointments, a major bonus. Additionally, more mobile students can keep their appointments while on a weekend hiking adventure or other excursions. Hopkins cautions: a student can potentially 'act for the camera' and present themselves in a different way for the duration of a virtual session, which may not capture the nuances of mental illness that may be more easily detectable in person. The rapport that can be built in person with a face-to-face connection is hard to replace with a literal 'smile for the camera' that may quickly dissolve once a session is over.

McNamara believes we will learn more on this topic in due time. He's noticed it's difficult to differentiate between virtual providers and determine their expertise or credibility. For example, does a provider have a particular specialisation in PTSD? Does a virtual provider have good ratings? He argues that with the evolution of virtual mental health services, varied options to cater for individual needs along with dedicated platforms for quality control will add to both the user experience and perhaps successful treatment.

#### **CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Fullick encounters some regions where a student prefers – due to cultural, language or even accent differences – the

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## We are seeing students with increased needs for mental health support – or perhaps also a higher comfort level in asking for support

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#### **WHY NOW?**

One obvious, and tired, answer: because COVID. Yes, but it is also more than that: we are seeing students with increased needs for mental health support,<sup>1</sup> or perhaps also a higher comfort level of asking for mental health support.

The authors of the present article have observed this trend from up close: Jenn Fullick, in her position as Director of Health, Safety and Security at the Institute for Study Abroad (IFSA), has noted an uptick of students requesting mental health services, and global shortages in services mean that the supply sometimes can't keep up with the demand. Kevin McNamara, as Resident Director of IFSA's Scotland site, observes that

pressures on the National Health Service, in particular due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, resulting in longer wait times for both routine and specialist appointments. Hopkins highlights that, for US students abroad, virtual options have historically been used as an emergency form of services when providers are not readily accessible (Japan), wait times were lengthy (London), or when it was advantageous to leverage a time-zone difference and access business-hours services when a student requests urgent services during non-business hours. Yet even beyond these regional realities, the need for and acceptance of virtual mental health services in international higher education is clearly on the rise.



benefit of a virtual counsellor who can be accessed from another geographic region. However, she argues that this may create scenarios where students in a different cultural or geographic context may be counselled with someone who is not familiar with the cultural context of the region. Hopkins also notes an important distinction between where mental health-care providers receive their education: some are not American, but are American-educated, which also factors into cultural complexities in counselling. With American students accustomed to US or Western-centric practices, this can be an important distinction to clarify when it comes to expectations on virtual services.

Along with medical services, mental health treatment is free in the UK as part of the National Health Service. However, in order to obtain treatment under the NHS, patients must be referred by their general practitioner, a practice based on the philosophy that a patient's mental health should be considered in tandem with their full medical history. With the pressure on the NHS in a post-pandemic era, mental health services in the UK have been vulnerable to budget cuts, resulting in longer waiting times in comparison to their US counterparts.

With such impacts on national services, students are turning to local university services for mental health support. While there is further debate in the sector about creating additional statutory duty of care for mental health services, the sector is continuing to report growing numbers of students accessing their services along with an increase in the complexity of mental health cases.

Thus, many international students continue to opt for US-based providers with direct access to private mental health professionals, favourable waiting times, and perhaps a more holistic treatment that continues uninterrupted by their time abroad.

#### NEXT WAVES

Further areas of consideration under the umbrella of virtual mental health support include issues like new categorisations of

rise of virtual support increases. In areas where students study abroad, being part of the community extends into mental health support and local providers as well. How do we balance ensuring students are continuing to be a part of all areas of this community when they may increasingly opt for virtual service?

Finally, 'virtual' doesn't guarantee privacy on both ends. Will we need to re-imagine our spaces to allow for rooms for virtual counselling services? Will changes

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## How do we ensure students are continuing to be a part of all areas of the local community when they may increasingly opt for virtual service?

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emergency vs long-term/existing treatments, and new dimensions in virtual 'well-being' and behavioural support. Behavioural health services do not necessarily require a license and may be well positioned to support with issues previously supported by a licenced counsellor, like roommate incompatibility, difficulty making friends, time management. How do we discern and direct students to the most appropriate support in this context of expanding options?

Furthermore, we will need to have a better understanding of complexities in privacy and recording keeping. What about legality and privacy of records of virtual providers: How do we consider this within the context of GDPR, FERPA and other data regulations governing study abroad?

We must also consider our locally-based mental health industries as the

need to be made to policies in housing facilities to restrict counselling, or 'counsel at risk' if accepting virtual services in a public space?

Time and data will reveal answers – and more questions. For now, we have an opportunity to explore and leverage advances in mental health technology to expand support for students abroad.

— JENNIFER FULLICK, STEVE HOPKINS & KEVIN MCNAMARA

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1. Abrams, Z. (2022). Student mental health is in crisis. Campuses are rethinking their approach. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/mental-health-campus-care>

# INCLUSIVE SERVICES AND SAFE SPACES

What does it mean to be inclusive with mental health services? Part of it is about abandoning one-size-fits-all approaches in favour of what different groups of students are telling us they need, and another aspect involves creating safe spaces in which to discuss these needs in the first place. In examining the nuanced intersections of identity and mental health, two authors with different backgrounds reflect on their own experiences navigating a world of complexity.

## **PART ONE: STELLA**

I, Stella, was born in Germany, where I was a person with a migrant background. I always wondered what made it a 'background' when it was mostly in the foreground, affecting how I was read and approached. When I moved to the UK, I was suddenly an international student, a label that seemed foreign to me at first but that I slowly started to embrace wholeheartedly. It added a new layer to my identity and created a turning point in my life, liberating me in multiple ways from the discrimination that had been a part of me until then. Having access to inclusive counselling services at the university where I was studying was directly linked to my healing, as was being embedded in a university environment that consisted of very diverse students and faculty. I felt seen, heard and represented. It changed my life.

Against this background, when speaking about 'well-being without borders', it is important to recognise that students come to our campuses with different experiences and from diverse locations. They are characterised by multiple realities, which consist of various intersecting experiences. All of us at higher education institutions – and especially those who are involved in the welfare and well-being of students – must recognise the intersection of structures such as socio-economic background, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, religion, sexual orientation and immigration status when designing and offering guidance and counselling services. In doing so, we acknowledge that international students do not form a homogeneous group and that institutions need to create diverse, equitable and inclusive mental health services as an integral part of their internationalisation process to foster a healthy campus environment.



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Inextricably linked to this is the realisation that racism is often the cause of trauma among both international students and local students from the Black, Indigenous and People of Colour community

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### I felt seen, heard and represented. It changed my life

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or with a migration background. Those experiences have an immediate effect on students' well-being, their performance, their mental health and their involvement in the university. It is crucial to have therapists at universities who can recognise racism as a possible cause of trauma and as a reason for depression, anxiety, low grades and dropouts.

#### **PART TWO: GÉRALDINE**

I, Géraldine, also arrived as an international student to the UK, as an Erasmus

exchange student. I went on to train in counselling and have worked for over 20 years in universities, first as a counsellor and then as head of counselling. At the University of Cambridge, I oversaw the provision of psychological support for the collegiate university, leading a large multidisciplinary team of counsellors, psychotherapists, mindfulness teachers and advisers on sexual harassment, assault and mental health.

Dealing with diverse and international student groups, it was crucial to be explicit that our team was apt at working with issues of difference – and to communicate this to students. We worked with specific student groups to understand their experience and distinct needs in relation to culture and ethnicity. Students told us that they wanted our service to be more representative and that they would value having the choice to request a counsellor from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) background.<sup>1</sup>

We updated our website, clarifying that students could request to be seen by a BAME counsellor. We included some information on the diverse types of students we saw (25% were from BAME backgrounds, while 40% came from outside the UK). We added that our staff group was diverse, trained and experienced in working with issues of culture and difference, including ethnicity, and that we could discuss issues of oppression as well as the impact that these may have on the therapeutic relationship.

We also organised training for our whole team on working with diversity and difference, and we started to offer culture-specific clinical supervision to staff when required. We continued to reflect on our practice in our clinical discussion groups and staff meetings. We kept on collecting and reporting on equal opportunity data in our annual report and in our ongoing discussions with student representatives. This led to our BAME counsellors offering





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specific training to the BAME officers in the student union. As head of service, I worked with the human resources department to include a statement in our job advertisements inviting ethnic minority applicants. We circulated our

### PART THREE: SAFE SPACES

The creation of a safe space, especially for students from marginalised and excluded communities,<sup>2</sup> is therefore crucial, and institutional accountability is key. A safe space can be defined as a space “that

engaging campus environments, which shows that there is a connection “between students’ success rates and providing marginalised students with supplementary resources and tools in order to thrive”.<sup>4</sup> Surveys have indicated that a large number of students encounter racial and gender-based violence on campus, which results in living with fear and experiencing isolation, the association emphasised.

We invite you all to create that safe space at your respective institutions, a space that is inherently anti-racist, diverse, inclusive, equitable, accessible and genuinely committed to the question of what we can do for each other, because, as Ella Shohat asserted in *Talking visions: Multicultural feminism in a transnational age*, our “genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but rather as parts of a permeable interwoven relationality”.<sup>5</sup>

—GÉRALDINE DUFOUR & STELLA SALIARI

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## Services need to understand and work from the frame of reference that their students bring, and be attuned to students’ cultural needs

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advertisements on BAME counsellor networks, which helped to attract and recruit a more diverse staff group.

All of the above helped to change the culture of the service. This work continues to be relevant in academia, given that there is an attainment and retention gap for students from BAME backgrounds and that these students are unlikely to access well-being services unless they feel that their needs will be met.

In a project which involved working with a university to ensure its well-being service is diverse, equitable, inclusive and accessible, I spoke to a student from a traditional Jewish background who stated that their counsellor had suggested they should speak up to their mother and assert themselves. This student understandably experienced the suggestion as inappropriate due to their cultural background, as they felt speaking up to their mother would have been disrespectful and rude. This highlights the need for services to understand and work from the frame of reference that their students bring and be attuned to students’ cultural needs.

doesn’t incite judgment based on identity or experience – where the expression of both can exist and be affirmed without fear of repercussion and without the pressure to educate. While learning may occur in these spaces, the ultimate goal is to provide support.<sup>3</sup>

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## Support offered to students has to be backed up by genuine actions and appropriate budget allocations, rather than merely paying lip service

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Accordingly, sources of support offered to students have to be backed up by genuine actions and appropriate budget allocations, and they must refrain from merely paying lip service. To underline the urgency of tailored support, NASPA, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, conducted a study on culturally

1. Ashworth, L. (2018, April 16). *Cambridge students seeking mental health support can now request a BME counsellor*. Varsity. <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/15307>

2. We are aware that ableism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism form additional realities for certain student groups, having a negative effect on their well-being. Counselling services must address those topics openly and embrace diversified approaches. However, for this article the focus is on ethnicity, race, culture and racism.

3. Break Away. (2017, December 1). *Do we need safe or brave spaces?* <https://alternativebreaks.org/safe-or-brave-spaces>

4. Museus, S., & Smith, E. *The culturally engaging campus environments: Model and survey*. NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. <https://naspa.org/report/the-culturally-engaging-campus-environments-model-and-survey>

5. Shohat, E. (1998). Introduction. In E. Shohat (Ed.), *Talking visions: Multicultural feminism in a transnational age* (pp. 1–64). MIT Press.



## ROTTERDAM CONFERENCE 2023

Like cities all over Europe, Rotterdam faces great societal challenges. One of the city's aims is to cultivate a circular economy by 2050. International and intercultural skills and developing viewpoints that go beyond local or national ways of thinking are needed to contribute to finding solutions for global and local challenges such as this. One of the city's main tools in rising to these challenges is its robust higher education offering.

Rotterdam offers a wide range of higher education institutions and programmes. Codarts brings together the oldest traditions and the latest trends in arts education. Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences draws on the diversity within the institution as a strength and challenges everyone to get the best out of themselves. Thomas More University of Applied Sciences aims to educate

skilled teachers who are well trained in urban education and conscious of their world citizenship. Inholland University of Applied Sciences focuses on fostering a sustainable living environment and a resilient society as main themes for interdisciplinary research and personal and accessible education. Last but not least, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the only research-intensive university in the city, has a tradition of independence and integrity, striving for mutual understanding across social and cultural divides.

Rotterdam's long tradition of international trade and welcoming people from all corners of the world, strongly connected to its large port, has made it a truly diverse city. From philosophers and politicians to doctors, entrepreneurs, economists and many more, Rotterdam alumni form a strong and diverse network of professionals around the globe. One of the most famous Rotterdammers of all time was philosopher and humanist Desiderius Erasmus, the tireless champion of freedom and tolerance who served

as inspiration for the European Commission's eponymous flagship student and staff mobility programme.

This diverse and international context impacts students' experience of Rotterdam through their first-hand experiences in the city. Higher education institutions facilitate such experiences through partnerships in the city, in which the students play a crucial role in exploring local needs, regional developments, citizen science and more. Collaborative learning, working and research are becoming increasingly common in Rotterdam. One notable form of this is 'labs', which are dynamic learning and experimentation environments in which the boundaries between the classroom, academic research and professional practice are blurred. Some of these labs are called 'field labs' others may be called 'living labs', 'city labs' *etc.*, reflecting the diversity of their objectives, substantive focus and how the collaboration takes shape, as illustrated in some of the following examples.





# N IN ROTTERDAM

## ART PROJECTS

In the project 'We're going oud'<sup>1</sup> (*oud* is Dutch for 'old' but pronounced like English 'out'), Codarts students worked on telling stories of elderly people with dementia in Rotterdam through dance and music. The community project, which took place as part of the European project 'Dance On, Pass On, Dream On' (DoPoDo), has been captured in a short documentary. DoPoDo is a four-year project addressing ageism in the dance sector and in society. It works towards a Europe that values older dancers for their experience and charisma, where our common European dance heritage is cherished and serves to inspire younger artists, and where older people are respected and engage in meaningful, creative activities.

The HefHouse is a collaboration between Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam UAS and the municipality to create and experiment with new strategies to engage with the local community. For instance, in the project 'Portraits of the City', artists and citizens turned

artworks into digital assets. Recreating a 'piece of art' became a shared language to talk about society. Instead of educating participants, the workshop series creates the ground for a participatory conversation giving insights into how society is transforming with technology.

## BUSINESS & SOCIETY PROJECTS

In the Urban Leisure and Tourism Lab<sup>2</sup> of Inholland UAS, local challenges meet an international perspective. Dutch and international students together explore how tourism and leisure activities can contribute positively to the city. The lab collaborates with the municipality and the business, healthcare, education, sports and culture sectors.

Students work with the Expertise Centre for Social Innovation (EMI)<sup>3</sup> of Rotterdam UAS on complex issues aimed at improving the quality of life of residents in South Rotterdam. EMI thus makes a positive contribution to an undivided city, in which inequality of opportunity is tackled. An example of this is the

support received by social entrepreneurs in South Rotterdam from a community of practice. The Social Entrepreneurship programme, in which students, partners and social entrepreneurs work together, focuses on finding creative ways to tackle unemployment and discovering and developing untapped talents of residents.

## PROJECTS SUPPORTING VULNERABLE GROUPS IN SOCIETY

For free legal advice citizens of Rotterdam can visit the 010 Rechtswinkel<sup>4</sup> at Inholland UAS. Students from the social legal services programme of Inholland UAS provide advice while being coached by professionals. This is particularly valuable to citizens who lack digital or Dutch language skills and cannot afford paid legal advice. Besides the 'shop' in the university building, the students also give legal advice in community centres.

The CARE Lab Rotterdam supports municipalities in the region to find a suitable approach for citizens in vulnerable situations, by connecting researchers from





Photo: Shutterstock

Erasmus University, Rotterdam UAS and Inholland UAS and the municipalities to policymakers, professionals and clients.

#### YOUTH PROJECTS

The Living Lab YoungXperts<sup>5</sup> is a collaborative platform of Erasmus University Rotterdam for youth, scientists, policy makers and professionals. This project enables us to understand how the social environment in which one grows up interacts with individual characteristics on developmental outcomes such as (mental) well-being, prosocial actions, broader contribution to society, and feeling empowered. Through iterative science approaches adolescents provide crucial input on the scientific priorities.

Mentoren op Zuid<sup>6</sup> links students from primary and secondary education to committed student mentors of Thomas More UAS. They coach and guide the student one-on-one with homework, career orientation, choosing a follow-up study or discovering their talents. The pupils develop themselves and at the same

time the students work on their professional teaching and coaching skills.

Finally, in the Outdoor Lab,<sup>7</sup> Thomas More UAS students experience that every subject can be taught outside. Pupils in the outdoor classroom experience another way of learning, from and through nature. This is of particular value in an urban environment. Pupils marvel at their surroundings. This appreciation for the space in which they live is essential for young people to become self-confident and self-willed citizens.

#### ROTTERDAM: CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIAL CHALLENGES TOGETHER

Eager to contribute to solutions to societal challenges, Rotterdam's students, researchers and educators step outside the boundaries of their disciplines and institutions, their city and country. Rotterdam's higher education institutions encourage the community to participate in research and education from its strengths, talents and backgrounds,

collaborating with partners around the world to create societal impact because together we learn and grow.

Article courtesy of Hogeschool Inholland

1. <https://www.codarts.nl/en/news/article/codarts-students-tell-stories-of-elderly-through-dance-and-music>

2. <https://www.tourismlabrotterdam.nl>

3. <https://www.emiopzuid.nl/en>

4. <https://www.inholland.nl/nieuws/rechtswinkel010-gratis-juridische-hulp-voor-rotterdamers>

5. <https://www.youngxperts.nl>

6. <https://mentorenopzuid.nl>

7. <https://www.thomasmorehs.nl/over-ons/buitenlab>



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