

University Student Mental Health: The Impact of Creative Practice

Donna Poade¹, Sue Langford²

¹ Falmouth University

² University of Plymouth

Corresponding E-mail: donna.poade@falmouth.ac.uk

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Abstract

Abstract It is widely acknowledged that student mental health in higher education (HE) is at crisis point. Exacerbated by the recent pandemic and due to limiting resources at institutions, students are experiencing severe mental health with a third reporting symptoms in England in 2021 (ONS 2023). Students are at particularly high risk for the onset of mental ill health as undertaking academic endeavours is a major trigger for mental health issues such as leaving home, academic pressure, newfound autonomy, developing new friendships and managing finances (Baik 2017; Macaskill 2013). However, very few studies have examined the impact of creative-based practices aimed to support student wellbeing. This paper reports on an evaluation of a creative practice initiative aimed to support students in HE. The conceptual model demonstrated within this paper, suggests some critical success factors when implementing a creative practice initiative and some likely benefits. Using qualitative data collected from interviews and observations, the findings suggest that creative practices do have a significant benefit on student wellbeing and therefore should be considered in curriculum design to enhance student learning and development.

Keywords: wellbeing, higher education, creative practices, student learning and development

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Despite the growing demand for mental health support (Campbell et al 2022), only about a third of students seek formal institutional help

in the UK (Macaskill 2012). To address these concerns, a variety of studies have been undertaken to evaluate the provision of student

mental health support (Duffy et al 2019; Hughes & Spanner 2019). The studies conclude that despite unprecedented demand for support for mental health, provision and models of delivery vary considerably between institutions. Traditionally, talking therapies is the most consistent, current intervention which yields positive results (McKenzie et al 2015). However, the capacity of counselling services to support large student numbers is stretched, especially during times of financial insecurity. Arguably a preventative and innovative approach is required which is less resource intensive, can offer support through peers, and can be delivered to students simultaneously.

Participating in creative activities has been established in the literature as effective in improving mental health within health settings in adults (Jenson & Bonde 2018). Indeed, studies highlight that arts and crafts play an important role in controlling stress and enhancing relaxation (Huotilainen et al 2018; Stickley et al 2018). Outside of the traditional counselling model however, creative activities feature less in higher education student wellbeing provision.

This research sought to explore the benefits of a creative initiative and evaluate its impact on participating students in a UK based university setting, guided by the following theoretical frameworks.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: positive psychology, mindfulness-based approaches, and theories of social connection.

Positive psychology focuses on understanding and enhancing well-being by identifying what is going well in individuals' lives and applying those insights to develop strategies that promote a meaningful, flourishing life (Carr et al 2021). Unlike traditional clinical approaches that often centre on diagnosing and treating illness, positive psychology emphasizes strengths and resilience—making it especially appropriate for use within student populations. Nonetheless, some critics argue that positive psychology can

veer into pseudoscience or become commercialised (Van Zyl et al 2024), which calls for careful, evidence-based application.

Mindfulness also plays a central role in this research. Its cognitive and emotional benefits on learning and wellbeing are well-documented (Hensley, 2020). The study draws heavily from Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1990) nine principles of mindfulness, which guide participants to engage with their experiences in a non-judgemental, accepting, and present-focused manner.

Finally, social connection is a critical determinant of wellbeing. Delgado et al (2023) and Holt-Lunstad (2021) both highlight the profound role that social relationships play not only in emotional health but also in long-term physical health outcomes. We therefore argue that strengthening peer relationships and fostering a sense of community are central objectives of creative wellbeing interventions.

Guided by these theoretical foundations, the following section outlines the design and implementation of the creative wellbeing initiative, detailing how these principles were translated into practice within a university setting.

Methodology

The initiative took place at a UK University during August 2021 and May 2023 funded by European Social Fund (ESF). The intervention comprised a variety of creative based, process-led sessions open to all undergraduate final year students across the University. The aim was to help equip students with the tools to explore their creativity, develop their confidence, enhance their wellbeing, and launch their creative career after university. Eligibility for participation in the initiative was considered under four categories where at least one of the four barriers had to be ticked for eligibility:

1. Health Condition (including short term and long-term conditions)
2. Mental Health

3. Physical Disability (including sensory impairment)
4. Learning Disability/Difficulty or on the Autism spectrum

Each part of the program of individual or groups of sessions was uniquely designed with a distinct theme and tailored for different stages of the academic calendar identified as stress triggers (start of each term and end year). The facilitators of the sessions were specifically selected with appropriate knowledge for the activity and their personal values and qualities plus the experience to engage and relate to a student audience.

The initiative featured a wide range of varying activities and session lengths from one day to a series of weekly sessions. All the sessions were developed so that students did not require specialist knowledge or a need for expensive equipment. The table below details a breakdown of session name, date and type of activities.

The research design included participant observations to understand the experiences of participants undertaking the initiative in their natural settings. Using observation as understanding is an established qualitative data collection tool (Kawulich 2005), favoured by a variety of disciplines which allows the capture of behaviour and language and in-depth exploration of thoughts and feelings of participants. Participant observations with the researcher present in person were carried out in 11 different sessions to gather data on students' experiences and verbal and non-verbal cues during participation. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 students after participation and 3 practitioners from different sessions from the program.

Table 1 – Session Information

Name and Dates of Session	Activities
Drawing 01-March 21 Recordings on Teams	These were a series of process led and non-assessed weekly creative activities such as automated drawing & writing, bad drawing, exquisite poetry, experimental mark making, book binding.
Wind Down 25-27 May 21 Summer School in Person	These were a series of process led and non-assessed creative activities such as automated drawing & writing, bad drawing, exquisite poetry, experimental mark making, book binding.
Music Video Summer School 1-3 June 21 Summer School in Person	Talk on music video by music lecturer, performance by Eliza Shaddad, Q&A with artist and lecturer, workshop on using green screen, workshop to develop presentation confidence, students work in groups of four to develop ideas for music video before presenting back to the artist.
LEAP Confidence 21-Jun 21 In Person	Designed for students to develop skills in pitching, presenting, and working in groups.
Wind down with Peach and Paul 22 Sept - 2021 10 Oct 2021 In Person	These were a series of process led and non-assessed creative activities such as automated drawing & writing, bad drawing, exquisite poetry, experimental mark making, book binding
Creative Writing 01-Sep-21 In Person	Series of workshops exploring different aspects of writing with different themes, including Science Fiction, Fairy Tales, Cornish myths & stories, horror, each session was 3 hours, the first would be a round table of interest reads, podcasts films etc. The engagement was incredible. The last session was carried out at the Fish Factory, Falmouth for a talk on Zines and the students made their own Zine.

Blue Space Activism 22 Sept - 10 Oct 2021 In Person	The idea of this programme was for students to create photos that encouraged people to look after blue spaces. Co-delivered with Photography, and included a talk on Sea 7 Submit and connection with artists and thinking about the relationship between words and images.
Winddown with Grays Wharf 25 Feb - 6 April 2022 In Person	These were a series of process led and non-assessed creative activities such as automated drawing & writing, bad drawing, exquisite poetry, experimental mark making, book binding, sewing, printing, sculpture, collaborative painting, all inspired by a trip to the Tate.
Forest Bathing 17-Nov-21 In Person	Haiku Poetry inspired by bathing in Fox Gardens, Falmouth Campus
Image Play 2 Feb - 9 March 2022 In Person	Papermaking, guided photography, still life photography
Pen Paper Power 2/2/22 - 9/3/22 + 3 days In Person	Series of workshops exploring various aspects of writing with different themes, including Science Fiction, Fairy Tales, Cornish myths & stories, horror, each session was 3 hours, the first would be a round table of interest reads, podcasts films etc. The last session was a talk on Zines and the students made their own Zine
Bad Art Festival 3-5 May 2022 In Person with Graphics Students	These were a series of process led and non-assessed creative activities such as automated drawing & writing, bad drawing, exquisite poetry, experimental mark making, book binding, sewing, printing, sculpture, collaborative painting, all inspired by a trip to the Tate St Ives Gallery.

Design for Good 9-13 May 2022 In Person with Graphics Students	Four charitable briefs and working with Alumni on a design sprint and presenting back to the charities.
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The authors confirm that the research presented in this article was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with Falmouth University's ethical policies. Ethical approval was granted on 27 May 2021 with a reference number of RIEC 21 52. Participants were fully briefed with information sheets on the project and participants were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation. Verbal and written informed consent were obtained for their anonymised information to be published in this article and all data was stored securely within the university's network.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants providing flexibility to explore emerging topics while following a guided question framework (Pathak and Intrat, 2012). Initial email invitations to participate in interviews yielded low response rates, so researchers began inviting students in person before sessions, which improved participation. To increase inclusivity and data collection, all students enrolled in the program were eligible. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix A.

Table 2 below shows the demographics of the sample, revealing a higher proportion of female participants, reflecting the gender imbalance in the courses involved. Since participation was self-selected, understanding this gender disparity warrants further research. Most participants came from creative arts programmes, where the initiative was initially promoted, leading to their over-representation. Business and other non-creative courses had fewer participants, which may bias results toward creative thinking and artistic expression. Expanding research to a broader student

population across disciplines would help explore the intervention's wider impact, motivations, and barriers. Despite this creative-focused bias, the findings remain relevant across disciplines due to the universally valued personal and developmental benefits reported by participants.

Table 2 – Number of Students on the Program by Gender

Gender	
Male	36
Female	90
Other	7
Preferred not to say	16
Total Students	155

Table 3 outlines the number of participants in each session which identifies the level of engagement across the initiative.

Interview data was triangulated with observational data to identify patterns and discrepancies. After blind double-coding, thematic analysis was applied to identify themes within the qualitative data (Gibson & Brown 2009). The analysis was inductive and data-driven, with themes evolving through interpretation of meanings and relationships in the data. A reflexive approach to thematic analysis was used, acknowledging researcher positioning throughout (Braun & Clarke 2021). The study adopted an interpretivist epistemology, viewing knowledge as constructed through human experience rather than objectively discovered (Constantino 2008; Pascale 2011). Following this process, dominant themes were revealed which are discussed in the following section.

Table 3 – Number of Students per Session on the Program

Session Activity	Number of Participants
Drawing	18
Wind Down 1	12
Music Video Summer School	8
LEAP	10
Wind Down 2	12
Blue Space Activism	14
Wind Down Greys Wharf	13
Forest Bathing	11
Image Play	12
Pen Paper Power	12
Bad Art Festival	34
Design for Good	16
Total Sessions Attended	172

Findings and Discussion

The key themes generated from the interviews and observations included personal wellbeing, social connection, and academic development. An additional theme, initiative enhancements, was also identified and categorised into structural and content-related improvements.

Personal Wellbeing

Most participants reported an increase in confidence after participation both in professional and personal settings. Specifically, confidence in skill development and knowledge relating to a particular activity (e.g. creative

writing): 'I'm definitely a lot more confident now because of the methods and stuff that we were taught there'. Most participants stated they had made friends during the sessions highlighting social bonding: 'this is a really great, great, experience and I can't wait to meet up with them again next week'. The social wellbeing of participants is particularly relevant due to social isolation during the pandemic and the lack of opportunity for face-to-face interactions. Most students expressed their joy and gratitude for face-to-face activities rather than online activities.

When participants were asked how they felt during the session they were attending, participants described feeling 'relaxed', 'calm', 'refreshed', 'inspired', 'less stressed', 'interested' and that the sessions were 'fun', 'informal', 'creative', 'friendly', 'inspiring'. One participant commented on how they 'couldn't wait for Wednesdays because when I come out of that session I feel like a new person'. Another participant likened the sessions to a 'reset button' irrespective of the activities being undertaken, where 'the week just started for me now' and another referred to the sessions they attended as 'my therapy'. One participant stated that she had been seeking support with stress, and after participation in the wind-down session now no longer needed support. Another commented on motivation:

'I genuinely look forward to Wednesday. Like, I wake up on Monday morning I cannot wait for a Wednesday because I know that when I come out of that session I feel like a new person again and it sounds ridiculous but I am extremely motivated'.

Many participants commented on how they found the sessions reduced stress and anxiety: 'it was nice. I mean it like relaxing, no stress', 'I could let go of like some of the stress I was holding on it was just a nice chance of like relax'. In terms of anxiety, 'it was a really good opportunity to sort of work through that anxiety and become more confident', and for those anxious about the activities if they had not done them before, 'I had anxiety around painting and creating and started off being very careful around

the actual painting but changed during the session with help of X and the nerves disappeared'.

Social Connection

The findings demonstrate that the initiative facilitated the building of healthy relationships across multiple social structures. For example, the participants commented on the skills, knowledge and relatability of facilitators as this participant comments, 'the lady who was running it, was really good and that that made it a lot better' and 'the lady that is running it, she's a publisher herself. So, it might just a bit experiencing advice, coz I would like to eventually become a writer and publish my work. So I just felt it was right for me'. Relatability and engagement skills in an open, inclusive manner was deemed very important: 'I think it was the openness of the tutors and how straight forward they were with just like open ended questions, which you always bring up stuff which you weren't expecting to say'.

Specifically, participants commented on support, 'It was definitely a need for just an outlet of creativity, that there was no judgement on where I could just explore and play and create'. The sessions were viewed as an opportunity for sharing; emotions, activities, food, and drink to enable group bonds to form within and beyond the program. Peer to peer support has been demonstrated as a powerful tool to enhance mental health in clinical and non-clinical settings (Naslund et al 2016; Ali et al 2015) and particularly championed for student populations during the pandemic (Suresh 2021). Collaboration was regarded as very important and noted by practitioners as engaging for participants: 'the energy in that space was amazing which I found inspiring to witness'. When considering collaboration and wider networking, this practitioner adds, 'connecting more with the local community is something that students also voiced, they wanted to leave a legacy, sort of positive legacy, I guess, as they leave university and go on to do different things in industry, they wanted to feel that they contributed something'.

Observation data supported the benefit of peer-to-peer support, where participants felt a sense of trust and connection to their peers, many of whom would share information on their thoughts and feelings where peers would listen and offer words or gestures of support demonstrating the creation of healthy relationships through a supportive environment, 'this feels like a safe space, and I know you all understand and won't judge me'. These exchanges then signalled a 'permission' to other group members to also share their thoughts and feelings, elicited by skilful facilitators that had good relatability to the group and were able to probe gently to offer students the space to explore their thoughts and feelings further. Participants viewed the small group size as an opportunity to get to know their peers and instil a sense of community as reported 'I was very grateful for that. It was a small group which meant you could kind of really get that kind of community feel going on'. This finding demonstrates the level of trust and support that this session had generated, aided by undertaking a relaxing and arguably mindful activity which often generates discussion and shared thoughts and feelings, especially in peer support groups (Kirsch et al 2014).

The space in which sessions took place was of vital importance to participants. Studies highlight that paying attention to the environment, space and atmosphere can promote feelings of wellbeing (Poade and Young 2022) and cultivate creative and collaborative mindsets (Doorley and Witthoft 2012). Many participants expressed positive feelings about the space, remarking on the layout, 'I like how we are all sitting together and facing each other' and 'it feels inspiring in here as I can see other people's work' and 'the energy in the room is so positive and warm'. Space for the sessions was used creatively and included indoor and outdoor green and blue spaces and trips to cultural assets. Immersing in nature and the ocean has known therapeutic benefits (Murphy et al 2022). The physical and emotional environment inspired creativity 'I am so proud of my work and my art is so improved', and offered a safe environment:

'That's what they said, it was a safe space and whatever was communicated in that room was strictly in that room, so it was a good way too', and also promoted collaboration and self-awareness:

I feel like, there is some, you know, more shy people in the group, and even, you know, three weeks ago, they wouldn't even share in the beginning. And now, I was like, wait, I've never actually heard her speak and now she's talking! and she's, you know, we're all having a conversation and it's so lovely to just to watch people grow even though you don't know them whatsoever!

Academic Development

The opportunity for participants to meet and work with people was also viewed as an opportunity to build healthy relationships, 'finding out about other people and their courses and why they're there'; 'just being quite open and sharing with people you may not have ever spoken to before, is quite a good way of being able to experience something you will have to experience when you go into some sort of workspace or profession'. Working with industry experts, Alumni and students who had similar interests was also seen as a benefit, particularly in sessions that had a specific activity (e.g. creative writing, photography, live client brief). The activities and resources required were also viewed as sustainable where participants commented on how limited resources could still provide an impact on their creativity whilst developing new skills and ideas:

'We would get an email beforehand of some like resources that we could have if I didn't have which was fine. It was actually just like a pencil and like paper. One time there was paint and ink and so if you don't have it then don't worry. That session I didn't have any like ink or any paint or anything but I did have a cup of tea, so I just like I dunked like leaves in a tea and just spread it out and I was having so much fun and I never thought I could like draw with tea!'

And when related to economic viability,

I just think it's a really great, great opportunity to people if they want to reach out and do something totally different or if they wanna look at hobby that they've not really touched much on, because it doesn't have to be cost related'.

Initiative Enhancement

Participants widely agreed that the programme should be more effectively promoted to increase student awareness and engagement. Suggestions included using video testimonials and having advocates introduce the programme during student inductions. Many were surprised at the low attendance given the perceived benefits.

Some participants, particularly those involved in client-based projects, recommended scheduling the sessions after final assessments to enhance their relaxing effect. Others suggested improvements such as larger group sizes, clearer client expectations, and more specific briefs. Additionally, there were calls for better communication regarding workload and clearer guidance for facilitators—especially alumni. Initiative enhancements were not included in the model as they are institutional specific. In the next section the findings have been further interpreted to create a conceptual model to visualise the factors required (inputs) in supporting positive student mental health (outputs) using creative activities.

Input-Output Model

This model can be applied in any institutional setting and with any discipline as the inputs and processes can be adapted to suit the institutional environment dependent on resources available. The commentary on the components can be found in table 4 below of key components of the input-output model. As with all research there are limitations to be considered which are detailed below.

Figure 1: Input-Output Model

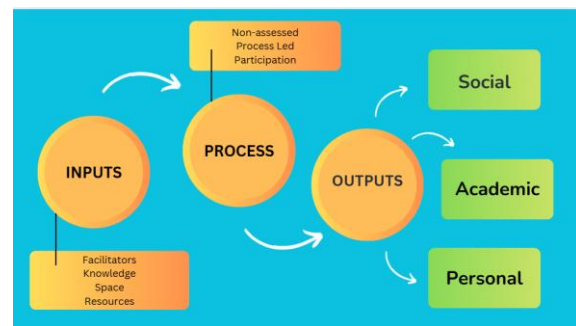


Table 4: Components Commentary

INPUTS	Description
Commitment	Recognition of the importance of the initiative, which should be embedded as a wellbeing ethos throughout the institution. Requires institutional and senior management buy-in, as well as motivated staff to drive the model sustainably. Includes financial and time commitments, with flexibility for activity locations.
Facilitators & Production Team	Committed, knowledgeable facilitators with expertise in their field and/or industry experience.
Space	Activities should take place in a fun, creative, and inspiring space that promotes calm, relaxation, and peacefulness. This environment enhances peer-to-peer support and enables sharing of experiences without judgment.
Resources	Activities should have diverse, inclusive, and inspiring materials. Content should be engaging and supported by skilled facilitators (as noted above).
PROCESS	Description
Non-assessed Activities	A critical factor that helps reduce pressure and fosters creative and innovative thinking. It also boosts confidence and self-belief, supporting the achievement of desired outputs.

Purpose-led	Activities should follow a purpose-led process, moving away from traditional output or outcome models, and focusing instead on meaningful engagement.
Collaboration	Emphasizes co-planning, co-designing, and co-delivery as essential components for successful participation and achieving outcomes.
OUTPUTS	Description
Personal Wellbeing	Improvements in confidence and self-esteem, reduced feelings of anxiety and stress, increased connectedness with peers, and greater resilience.
Academic Development	Enhanced personal wellbeing positively affects academic development. As confidence increases and stress decreases, students develop a broader portfolio of skills, knowledge, and experience. This boosts academic performance and further supports mental wellbeing in a circular process.
Social Connection	Building healthy relationships between peers and also between participants and facilitators.

Limitations

This study utilised a self-selecting participant group, which may have introduced sample bias and reduced the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the perceived effectiveness of the activities is inherently subjective, with individual differences in participant experiences potentially affecting the consistency of outcomes. The transient nature of the student population also raises questions about the long-term sustainability of any observed benefits, particularly since a longitudinal approach was beyond the scope of this project.

In addition, this creative approach may not be universally applicable. For example, individuals with low self-esteem might face challenges in engaging with creative activities (Chacon-Lopez & Broncano, 2023). Likewise,

those who favour highly structured environments may struggle with or be less responsive to the open-ended, exploratory aspects of creative practice. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the initiative presents considerable potential for broader application, as explored in the following discussion.

Conclusion

The increasing concern surrounding student mental health served as the primary motivation for this initiative. A common criticism of current support services is the lack of consistency and scalable, easy-to-implement solutions. This initiative presents a promising alternative—an effective, low-cost, low-resource programme that is straightforward to implement within higher education settings.

Successful implementation requires several key enablers: knowledgeable facilitators, commitment from senior leadership, and access to suitable spaces and materials. The activities should remain non-assessed and process-oriented, with a strong emphasis on collaboration and active engagement. Involving industry professionals, such as alumni, further enriches the experience and fosters meaningful connections.

However, institutional buy-in remains a significant challenge. Without clear support at an organisational level, the sustainability and scalability of the initiative are limited. To evaluate the long-term impact of the programme, further research—particularly longitudinal studies—could provide deeper insights into its personal and professional benefits for students.

Evidence indicates that engagement in creative practices can enhance student wellbeing, foster healthy relationships, and create opportunities for peer collaboration and support. These outcomes contribute to increased positive emotions, improved learning experiences, and holistic student development, therefore we strongly recommend the integration of creative practices into curriculum design as a cost-effective and impactful strategy to support student wellbeing.

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Author Bios:

***Dr. Sue Langford** is a Senior Fellow of Advance HE and brings extensive experience from roles at institutions both in the UK and USA. Her research focuses on wellbeing, sustainability, and experiential learning and she loves a good interdisciplinary collaboration.*

***Dr. Donna Poade** is a Senior Lecturer in Experience Design at Falmouth University. Her current research is centred on mental health and wellbeing, innovation, and creativity. In addition, she is undertaking professional training to qualify as a psychotherapist.*

Appendix A - Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. The interview should not last any longer than 30 minutes. [Reconfirm permissions for audio/video] [Consent Form Received?]

Respondent Name:

Date of Interview:

Date(s) of Session:

Online

Researcher:

1. Could you tell me your course and current stage of studies please?
2. How did you find out about the Springboard Studios sessions?
3. Which sessions have you attended?
4. How many people were in the sessions with you? Did you know any other participants beforehand? (Ask per separate session if relevant)
5. Why did you choose to attend the sessions? (Ask per separate session if relevant) (Probe for motivations and interests if needed)
6. What were your expectations before attending the session(s) if any? (Ask per separate session if relevant)
7. What were the highlights of the session(s) for you?
8. How could the session(s) be improved?
9. Can you tell me about the sessions in terms of activities? Did you engage in all the activities? How did you feel during the activities?
10. All of these activities are non-assessed, how do you feel about that?
11. What was the impact of the session on you (i.e. feelings afterwards – confidence, positivity, hope, resilience?) (probe on short term and long term impacts)
12. The sessions are designed to help students transition into the workplace from studies – do you think these sessions help with this aim and explain why?

Thank and close interview