

FORUM

MEMBER
MAGAZINE

Discussing international education



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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



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“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

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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”

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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IN CONVERSATION WITH

**NIC
BEECH**

JACOB GIBBONS
EAIE

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 pandemic¹, 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

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

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.

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

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 film² 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.

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



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'¹ (*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 Lab² 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)³ 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 Rechtswinkel⁴ 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 YoungXperts⁵ 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 Zuid⁶ 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,⁷ 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.emiop Zuid.nl/en>

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

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

6. <https://mentorenop Zuid.nl>

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

EAIE BLOG SPOT

In between *Forum* issues, visit the EAIE blog for news, views and insights, anywhere and at your fingertips. Just grab yourself a comfy seat and start browsing!



07
MAR

Gender inequality in higher education: lessons from Ireland

The gender gap in higher education is a complex structural challenge. Ireland's recent review of gender equality indicates some promising paths forward.

<http://ow.ly/v9r450OAxUo>



20
MAR

9 key components of positioning your institution abroad

In today's international higher education market, institutions need to stand out. Here are 9 tips to help yours do just that.

<http://ow.ly/txk350OAxWh>



23
MAY

Global internships: preparation for the new world of work

With skill shortages on the rise in developed economies, global internships offer one promising solution.

<http://ow.ly/al0U50OAxY3>

EAIE PODCAST



29
MAR

Nadja Greku and Valeria Redjepagic: Roma in European higher education today

Explore how the underrepresented Roma community can gain greater access to higher education in Europe.

<http://ow.ly/6jll50OAxZ6>



26
APR

Adrienne Fusek & Adinda van Gaalen: International education, climate change and cognitive dissonance

Explore key conceptual and practical questions at the intersection of international education and climate action.

<http://ow.ly/nqeR50OAvOM>



24
MAY

Joana Westphal & John McNamara: Transnational education: UK perspectives

As access to the UK becomes more challenging for European students, are transnational education programmes the answer?

<http://ow.ly/1oIT50OAv2u>



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AMSTERDAM

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Creating a positive international student experience

30 November-01 December 2023

Gain a better understanding of the various factors that can affect international and mobility students. Learn how to encourage cooperation between departments and develop the tools to influence decision-makers, change institutional practices and evaluate success.

CALENDAR

04–06
JULY

18th Annual BUILA Conference
The route to a sustainable future

<https://www.buila.ac.uk/conference>

05–07
JULY

European Student Affairs Conference 2023

Shaping change in student services

<https://www.studentenwerke.de/en/content/european-student-affairs-conference-2023>

23–25
AUGUST

IEASA 2023 Annual Conference

Looking back - looking forward

<https://ieasa.studysa.org>



26–29
SEPTEMBER

33rd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition in Rotterdam

Connecting currents

www.eaie.org/rotterdam

06–08
NOVEMBER

Conference of the Americas on International Education (CAEI)

The future is now

<https://caie-caei.org/en/>

13–14
NOVEMBER

EAIE Academy in the City

How to manage an international office

<https://www.eaie.org/training/academy-2023/how-manage-international-office.html>

15–17
NOVEMBER

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