Academic support

Developed by Vilnius University team

Students undertaking higher education face a wide range of ongoing academic-related stressors, which can reduce academic achievement, decrease motivation and increase risk of attrition (Browne, Munro, & Cass, 2017; Li & Carroll 2017; Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020; Stallman 2010). The main source of distress is the transition from secondary school to university in general (Cage, Jones, Ryan, Hughes, & Spanner, 2021) and academic work load and pressure of getting good grades, assessment deadlines and writing the exams in particular (Frank, & Kodikal, 2019). The ongoing stress, related to academic-demands, has an impact on increased mental health problems among students, particularly in comparison to general population (Cvetkovski, Reavley & Jorm 2012; Larcombe et al. 2016; Stallman 2010), such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, substance use; even the risk of suicide (Lesinskiene et at., 2020). The vast majority of students, who approach counselling services, seek help for academic issues (GuildHE Research Report, 2018). The pandemic situation, that arose in spring 2020, posed challenges not only to physical health (e.g. decreased mobility, over-weight problems, sleep impairments), but to the mental health as well. The research, conducted by the Center of Psychotraumatology at Vilnius University (Lithuania) revealed, that changes in the study process were among the other major stressors, related to COVID-19 crisis, particularly for the first-year students (Center of Psychotraumatology of Vilnius University, 2020). Therefore, the previous approach towards education as a buffer against mental health problems has been replaced by understanding, that the studies at tertiary education is a significant source of tension affecting student well-being (Bulotaite et al., 2012).

The above-mentioned stressors inherent in a higher education system cannot be eliminated, only mitigated and managed. Moreover, building resilience and strengthening well-being might be more sustainable than attempts to avoid distress and tension. Baik and others (2017) distinguished the following five well-being essentials that should be fostered by learning environment at higher education:
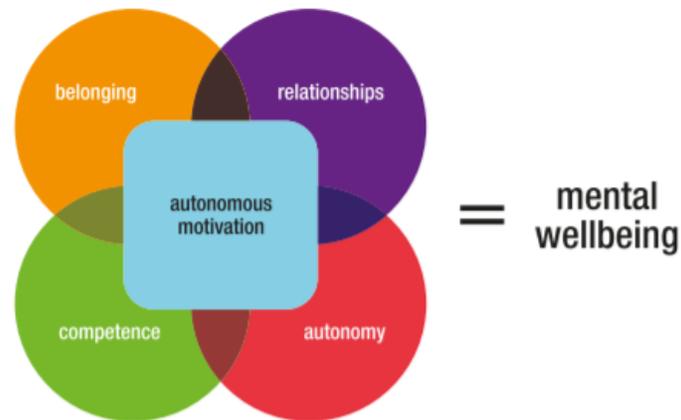
Figure 1. *Five well-being essentials (Baik et al., 2017)*

Experiences of belonging, positive relationships, autonomy and competence are essential to psychological wellbeing; they provide the psychological 'nutriments' or 'resources' that sustain and enhance autonomous motivation and the engagement, persistence and effort that flow from it (Baik, et al., 2017)

Practices that foster student wellbeing through academic support

Generally, student academic support is provided by centrally located university counselling and support services, although some universities integrate such services into each faculty. Regardless of the model or the quality of these specific support services, they are just one venue of support.

Taking into consideration, that students are in transition from secondary to higher education, they need to master new learning styles and techniques. Universities provide ***specific courses and online tutorials*** to help students preparing for academic study.

A) *Academic literacy courses or study skills workshops*. University of Oxford (UK) proposes a comprehensive training program including the following topics:

- Managing your time and developing learning strategies
- Reading academic texts critically and effectively
- Taking notes in lectures and from hard or electronic copy
- Planning and writing essays and reports
- Constructing and presenting bibliographies and references
- Developing an academic writing style
- Improving spelling and grammar
- Preparing and delivering presentations

- Revising and sitting examinations

For students, unable to attend the workshops or register for the online program, there is an opportunity to consult one of the study skills guides via borrowing a book from the library or access the materials online.
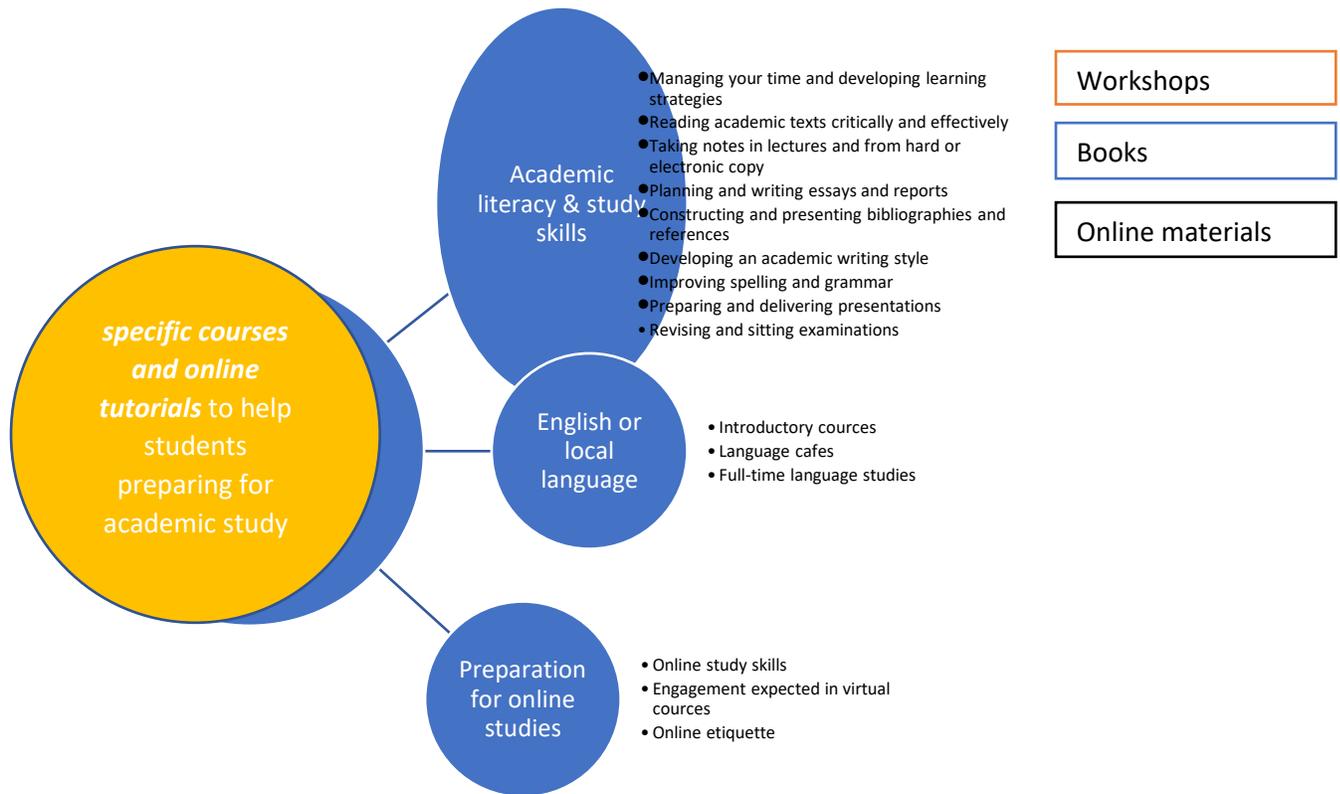

Figure 2. Example of specific courses and online tutorials good practices

More information:

https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/student-study-skills

B) *English language and/or local language courses for international students*. University of Lund (Sweden) offers a host of opportunities to learn Swedish starting from introductory Swedish language course through learning outside the classroom, i.e. at language cafes, to full-time Swedish studies.

More information:

https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/current-students/options-for-learning-swedish

C) *Support in getting ready for online studies*. During the pandemic, University of Bristol (UK) developed a *Digitally ready course,* which provides introduction to online study skills, informs on engagement expected in virtual course spaces and online etiquette.

More information:

http://www.bristol.ac.uk/digital-education/students/

The curriculum is central to students' experience of university, as it determines what and how students learn, influences their perception of and reaction to the world. Students wellbeing is also cultivated and supported through intentional **curriculum design**.

A) Taking into consideration the importance of *shifting students from dependent to independent learning*, teaching of skills such as planning, organization, self-instruction, self-monitoring and self-evaluation is essential, particularly for the first-year students (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2015). At the module level, there is an opportunity to apply flipped classrooms, when students gain first exposure to new material outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then class time is used to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge through strategies such as problem-solving, discussion or debate. It is also necessary to develop students' reflective skills though application of guided journaling or self-monitoring log (Field et al., 2015).

More information:

https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1074711.pdf

B) *Fostering students' motivation, encouraging participation, promoting autonomy, inclusion and competence*. Motivation and autonomy are promoted, when curriculum is structured and coherent in the sequencing of topics and tasks; when it is not over-crowded; when knowledge and tasks are found by students as important and meaningful. Participation is encouraged if the curriculum takes into account the students' capacities, prior knowledge, interests or experiences; if some time is devoted for 'ice-breakers' and 'getting-to-know you' activities as well as interactive learning methods; if some 'small group' experiences are ensured or an opportunity of individual supervision provided. Competence is enhanced if the optimal challenge is offered on the basis of earlier established 'threshold' concepts and skills; if students are provided with meaningful and informative feedback on their progress (Baik et al., 2017).

More information:

https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2408604/MCSHE-Student-Wellbeing-Handbook-FINAL.pdf

Recommendations

1. Making academic support available to all students, increases their resilience to academic challenges and helps preventing further problems.

2. Special attention given to freshmen students' learning skills, enables them to adapt to new learning environment.

3. Curriculum design which takes into account even distribution of workload during the year and inclusive teaching methods reduces unnecessary academic stress.

4. Different assessment tools applied to evaluate academic success and emotional wellbeing throughout the study process fosters identification and remediation of students at risk for academic failure.

5. Proactively approaching students with lower academic performance helps them overcome studies-related difficulties and prevent dropouts.

6. Academic support should be flexible enough to adjust to *force majeure* situations, such as COVID-19, by implementing innovative strategies of teaching, counselling, assessment and feedback provision.

7. Wellbeing of HEIs personnel is an important condition for academic success and wellbeing of students: Happy staff – Happy students 😊

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