



## OUTPUT 7

# Multilanguage Online Toolkit: New Innovative Techniques for Increasing Student Wellbeing on Campus— Evidence and Practice

## Toolkit 4: Innovative Approaches Towards Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education

Partners on Embrace HE project



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UNIVERSITY OF CRETE



## Executive Summary

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This report outlines the Multi-language Toolkit that focused new and innovative techniques that can be applied on campus to increase students' wellbeing. The evidence-base for the techniques presented in the Toolkit is reported, links to arts-based approaches, mindfulness, meditation, and exercises are embedded in the text.

Embedded in mission statements of Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) around Europe is the goal of promoting academic performance and foster students' wellbeing. Toward this end, HE institutions implement curricular and extracurricular programming using an integrated and holistic approach. They design services that provide students with the support they need to fulfil their academic, professional, and personal needs. The programming aims to advance wellbeing by building students' capacities in establishing meaning and purpose; cultivating resilience to stress and anxiety; developing confidence and purposefulness; and expanding their reflective competencies, including self-awareness, -expression, and -acceptance (Travia et al., 2020; Barton et al., 2020).

Wellbeing is a multidimensional construct that encompasses a complex combination of factors including somatic, intellectual, affective and relational functioning. Applying Martin Seligman's PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011) for flourishing, in which wellbeing is construed and delineated into five elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. According to Seligman (2018) each of these five elements contributes to wellbeing. Leontopoulou (2020) explored the usefulness of the PERMA

model and overall theory as an organizing framework for measuring wellbeing of emerging adults in HE settings in Greece during the socioeconomic crisis years. Her results show that the PERMA elements are linked to other wellbeing indicators and that systematic and holistic HE programming can use the framework to address students' mental health and wellbeing needs.

Toolkit 4 describes, provides exercises, links and references on five innovative approaches that can promote students' wellbeing. These approaches can be applied in groups, campus-wide activities, and individual services. They are:

1. **Mindfulness** is a type of meditation and a set of practices that include breathing methods, guided imagery, and techniques to relax the mind and the body. The concept is derived from Jon Kabat Zinn's definition of mindfulness, "paying attention in the present moment, non-judgmentally with the aim of helping people live each moment of their lives—even the painful ones—as fully as possible" (Kabat-Zinn, 1993, p. 260). These practices cultivate how to be present in our everyday lives so that we have access to the richness of awareness. They entail paying attention to experience with unobstructed curiosity, openness, acceptance and kindness. In such a manner, mindfulness practices aid in not suppressing or obfuscating painful emotions and thoughts, beholding thoughts and noticing feelings, being present with empathy and compassion, being self-aware and tolerant of complexity and distress (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness practice combines western psychological thought with eastern meditative practices, mainly stemming from Buddhist teachings and vipassana meditation.

HE students in mindfulness programs are encouraged to cultivate a stance of compassionate awareness towards their everyday experience through a variety of meditation exercises that use the breath, the body as well as awareness of thoughts and emotions together with reflective learning. The way mindfulness is applied in higher education varies significantly, with some institutions offering well-established programs with some good research background such as Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) while others offer more tailor-made programs and/or including less hours which remain to be validated by research evidence. (University of Crete, Greece)

2. **Arts-Based Approaches** are all arts-related interventions that focus on having a positive impact on health and well-being. The relationship between health, well-being and art has been extensively studied (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Secker, et al., 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Engagement with art through active participation in creative activities and attendance at cultural events have benefits that include: sensory stimulation; self-expression; identity building; provides a safe place free from judgement; social interaction; sense of belonging; improved control over life circumstances; empowerment, etc. (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Well-being, [APPG], 2017, p. 20). Therefore, the arts are relevant to promoting and enhancing physical and mental health and, indeed, well-being. (Universidad Publica De Navarra Spain)
  
3. **Tai Chi** is a form of Chinese martial arts, developed since the 17th century in China (Lan, Chen, Lai, & Wong, 2013). It is based on philosophical notion “Grand Ultimate” that describes the universe as well as opposite phenomena Yin and Yang) as a state of dynamic balance (e.g., light and dark, movement and stillness, waves and particles) (Jahnke, Larkey, Rogers, Etnier, & Lin, 2010). Tai Chi aims at enhancing physiological and psychological function (Jahnke et al., 2010). The core elements of Tai Chi may have a soothing effect on the ‘fight or flight’ nervous system, usually activated in stressful situations (Harvard Health Publishing, 2019). Tai Chi practice on reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety and increased interpersonal sensitivity. Furthermore, Tai Chi practice may affect the reduced symptoms of compulsion, somatization, phobia and hostility (Mulcahy et al., 2020) (Vilnius Universitetas, Lithuania)
  
4. **Meditation and the body.** Stress and anxiety are major issues for many students (Amanvermez et al, 2020). They can affect their motivation and their academic performance (Sanders & Lushington, 2002). It is not only students who experience these barriers to wellbeing, however; staff working with students commonly experience stress and burnout (Kugiejko, 2015). This section of the toolkit introduces ways in which various forms of

meditation, including yoga as moving meditation, could help to enhance both staff and student wellbeing. (Birmingham City University, United Kingdom)

5. **Gamification** entails the use of game-like elements in non-entertainment/ game-based contexts to motivate (information system) users to change their behaviour (Hamari et al., 2014). In HE, gamification is most often used to describe a single strategy that uses various activities and rewards to instil students and/or teachers' engagement in teaching and learning in both arts and sciences courses. Introduction of gamification elements into HE courses represents an innovative and creative practice. Promising innovative practices based on the use of gamification are being used in a variety of countries, tertiary education levels, disciplines and contexts—urban and rural. It is also interesting to note that several practices combine gamification along with mindfulness to provide a more positive influence on teachers' and students' well-being in the HE context. (Western Balkans Institute, Serbia)

## Toolkit 4 Summary

Toolkit 4 outlines how mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being and that innovative approaches can be embedded in HEI's curriculum, providing students with activities that enhance their overall health and quality of life during their tertiary education tenure. Lastly, students can use the exercises, apps and links in this toolkit for self-care and support.

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