



**Wellbeing at HSU:
Understanding Students' Needs
through Peer-led Research**

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Introduction

The Higher Education sector is undergoing what is being described as a '*student mental health crisis*'. The proportion of students reporting mental health difficulties has almost tripled since the 2016/17 academic year¹. The prolonged impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions to HE² and additional pressures caused by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated students' wellbeing³.

These trends are recognised among Sheffield Hallam University students as well. In November 2024, students reported mental health such as stress, anxiety or depression as the most common reason for considering dropping out of university, with 57% of students selecting this over struggling financially or struggling with other responsibilities⁴.

To better understand the wellbeing needs of the student population at Sheffield Hallam University, a research project was organised by Hallam Students' Union's Campaigns team and Research team. The project involved student staff who had knowledge and experience of student wellbeing interventions organising the content

¹Sanders, M. (2023) *Student Mental Health in 2023: Who is Struggling and How the Situation is Changing*. TASO. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/student-mental-health-in-2023.pdf>

² Jones, C. S. and Bell, H. (2024) 'Under increasing pressure in the wake of COVID-19: a systematic literature review of the factors affecting UK undergraduates with consideration of engagement, belonging, alienation and resilience'. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13603108.2024.2317316>

³ Schofield, C. (2024) 'The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on online student engagement and future study plans'. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13596748.2024.2371643>

⁴ West, V. and Colburn, J. (2025) 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' 2024/25 Wave 1 Report. *Hallam Students' Union*. [HHAWD W1 Report 2024 25.pdf](https://www.hallam.ac.uk/media/1000000000/HHAWD_W1_Report_2024_25.pdf)

and structure of the workshops, as well as facilitating the discussions and tasks during the sessions.

Executive Summary

- The transition of becoming a student can have major implications for social support networks, and thus for wellbeing. These implications are even greater for international students, who often experience a combination of loneliness and difficulty adapting culturally.
- Students see HSU societies and Give It a Go events such as social craft activities as holding potential for a revised wellbeing offer, through peer-led events or 'buddy' systems. Students put less emphasis on clinical or therapeutic interventions in this sense but prioritised the social dimension of wellbeing support.
- Students who participated in the workshops were divided in opinion of whether the wellbeing interventions should be compulsory and incorporated into their university course's content, or whether it should be optional in terms of accessing support.

Methodology

This research project was influenced greatly by participatory action research. Participatory action research (PAR) involves collaborative community-led knowledge exchanges, where the people affected by the issue are the ones that lead in producing and using knowledge about it⁵. PAR models have increasingly been incorporated into qualitative research projects investigating community wellbeing interventions and Higher Education contexts.

Student staff members, including Student Social Connectors, BAME Ambassadors, and Campaigns Assistants, were all offered bespoke training into how to conduct and effectively facilitate qualitative focus groups. Training included building on active listening skills and navigation of sensitive topics. The student staff members were then invited to a session where they shared feedback as to how the workshop sessions should look like, including the formulation of a general schedule or guide. Any members of staff absent were encouraged to virtually send feedback asynchronously.

There were three 'Wellbeing workshops' spanning three days. Each workshop lasted one hour exactly. The sessions each consisted of two designated student staff 'facilitators', with some being attended by additional student staff such as Lead Reps, Community Organisers, and the HSU elected Wellbeing, Sport & Physical Activity Officer.

- Workshop 1- Tuesday 11th February: 10 attendees
- Workshop 2- Wednesday 12th February: 9 attendees
- Workshop 3- Thursday 13th February: 9 attendees

During the sessions, a member from both the Research and Campaigns teams would introduce the session and discuss their rights as a research candidate, what the

⁵ See Sally Lloyd-Evans (2023) *Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit*. Available at: <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research/wp-content/uploads/sites/114/2023/06/PAR-Toolkit-v10.pdf>

research will contribute to, and their responsibilities during the session. After this brief introduction, the discussion would be handed over to the student staff facilitators.

Findings

The workshops began with a brief discussion about what impacts wellbeing as a student, and what strategies or resources students use to mitigate harms to their wellbeing. This introductory discussion acted as well as an icebreaker exercise, with students across all three groups sharing their experiences and coping strategies.

Participants then moved into two smaller groups to work on a hypothetical wellbeing intervention that could be implemented by Hallam Students' Union. For this, the Campaigns team provided a set of guiding criteria to consider:

- Budget – how much will it cost?.
- Do you want student staff? Volunteers?
- How will you engage students?
- How will you know if it has been a success?
- What challenges will you face?
- What risks do we have to think about?
- What problems will it help solve?

Participants were given 30 minutes to work on these 'intervention' ideas and were asked to record any ideas or thoughts on poster paper so that they could verbally present it to the other group afterwards (see Appendix A for the different ideas).

After the task, the participants would reconvene, where each group would share their ideas, with the other group offering their thoughts on how successful they think that certain idea would be.

International students' experiences

A few of the participants discussed that many students are impacted by the changes of starting university, and that this change in living can have expected repercussions on mental wellbeing. Few students spoke about struggling to stay in touch with family and friends while settling into university as being interlinked with negative wellbeing.

This seemed more relevant when considering international students. There were multiple conversations across different sessions about the different wellbeing challenges that international students face in adapting to life in Sheffield. One international student emphasised the importance of getting involved as a society committee member as a means of avoiding social isolation:

“For me, loneliness sucks. And being an international student, I’m away from my family and friends. Making friends here, it’s not actually easy, you know. I just keep myself indulged [in the society]. So, I don’t feel pressure from being involved in the committee, it’s how I maintain my wellbeing”.

Another international student spoke about how a misunderstanding of national and local laws and customs when they first arrived in Sheffield impacted their wellbeing very negatively. Later, in the workshop task, this student’s group discussed the

possible creation of a specialised society for international students adapting to life in Sheffield, to support wellbeing through culture. This group elaborated on this, arguing that even having some networking or advice or training about applying for part time jobs in the UK could be helpful:

“Maybe online sessions so that they can inform us about work documentation, what is required here for part time job, for networking. LinkedIn is a professional website, right? That's a high-level thing. So new students don't even know how to make an account on that, how to engage with people, so there should be some information about that but also about helping international students find part time jobs because it can be quite difficult to understand the whole process when you've never been in the country before.”

When discussing with the student facilitators of the workshops too, the stark differences in wellbeing overall between international and home students was prevalent. Some of the facilitators noticed as well that the international students as well were less aware of the resources on offer that would aid their emotional wellbeing.

A wellbeing society?

Across all discussions about wellbeing, one of the most prevalent themes was the significant emphasis being placed on the social dimension in maintaining positive wellbeing. Many discussions focused on student wellbeing being impacted by building good support networks, and that any interventions should centre on supporting the social aspect.

A recurring idea across the wellbeing intervention activity was that existing HSU structures and services could adapt to better accommodate the hypothetical offer to students. Many ideas spoke about the introduction of a society with emphasis on wellbeing. These ideas specifically stressed the importance of a student-led wellbeing support network for students who may be struggling.

One of these ideas was described as *“a less formal version of Student Social Connect”* in the sense that there would be different activities led by student experts such as culinary, craft, creative, sports, and so on. This would allow for students to join as they please through an open-door policy and connect with others in the process. This group in question advocated for a pairing up or peer connect style of interaction:

“It could work like a buddy system. So, we could start with a few people that are trained to help other students engage and pair them up with students. And then as it goes on for longer, the students that have been in it for longer can then become buddies for new students”

Another group focused this idea more as an ‘alcohol-free’ society, promoting more sober socials. They elaborated on this idea, stating that a lot of student activities and student culture is associated with going out, or alcohol, which in turn can have negative impacts on wellbeing. Another student commented on this:

“I appreciate your consideration of students like me that don't drink much. And it can be so annoying when people keep inviting me out of being like, is this the only way you can be social?”

More ‘wellbeing’ events

Many of the students across the various groups highlighted the ‘Give It a Go’ (GIAG) events as examples of what HSU is currently doing with regards to supporting wellbeing. Students cited examples such as sip-and-paint night and craft activities as being central to the HSU student wellbeing offer.

A few of the students’ ideas for a wellbeing initiative saw either wellbeing-related activities being embedded more deeply into the GIAG or HSU student events offer. These specific ideas included more therapeutic activities or courses such as art therapy or mindfulness activities, or more general outdoor or physical activities.

GIAG events provided a perfect informal outlet for students perhaps overwhelmed or feeling stigmatised in going to ‘official’ wellbeing services. Students mentioned that GIAG events were low-pressure and low-commitment opportunities for those sorts of students:

“You can just do it once and if you don't like it you don't have to do it again or if it's something you enjoy you could go again or you could like adapt it and do it yourself as well, which I think is really good.”

It is worth, therefore, considering ways in which more low-commitment and low-cost wellbeing activities can be considered within the current GIAG offer, as both the interest and need are there.

Compulsory course content

Another prevalent debate that arose across the discussions and activities was questioning whether the wellbeing interventions should be compulsory or voluntary to attend.

On the one hand, a few students mentioned that having preventative, compulsory sessions embedded into their course or module content could help those that are perhaps anxious or reluctant to reach out for help. These ideas saw the sessions being conducted by wellbeing advisors and other wellbeing-associated staff roles within the university, rather than the Students’ Union. Some students particularly liked the idea of it being a part of their course, and thought even optional sessions would be effective:

“I like the idea of it being incorporated into the course. I feel like it's really important the sessions are part of the course. The only issue could be whether people turn up because obviously people don't turn up to everything. But you get that with anything.

I feel like as long as you have the option there that then allows people to potentially go, and it entices them more if it's actually part of the course and it is people that are familiar with because it'll obviously be their lecturers.”

Other students disagreed that the wellbeing interventions should be compulsory. A few students argued that a compulsory set of lectures or sessions may be overwhelming for students who need wellbeing support. One student felt passionately about the idea of having compulsory sessions:

“I feel like if I had to attend a wellbeing activity that is compulsory it’s not exactly wellbeing if that makes sense. It needs to be my choice. I want help.”

This student suggested that Course Reps should be incentivised so that student wellbeing is more central to the representation system. They mentioned that this role would act as an influential voice for students to signpost them effectively to the relevant services, either at SHU or HSU.

Other students who disagreed with the idea of having wellbeing workshops as part of the course did mention that they thought it would be very helpful to have the existing resources and contacts for mental wellbeing support being more widely accessible. There was also discussion about signposting students to SHU and HSU resources continuously rather than just during induction week, which some students mentioned was the case:

“I think we were told in induction week or some point in our induction lectures who our wellbeing advisor was. But your induction lectures are overwhelming, I mean the first week of uni, you have lots of other stuff to remember, I think not having it in week one makes more sense or maybe repeating it. Like even if it’s just the beginning of each module.”

Conclusion

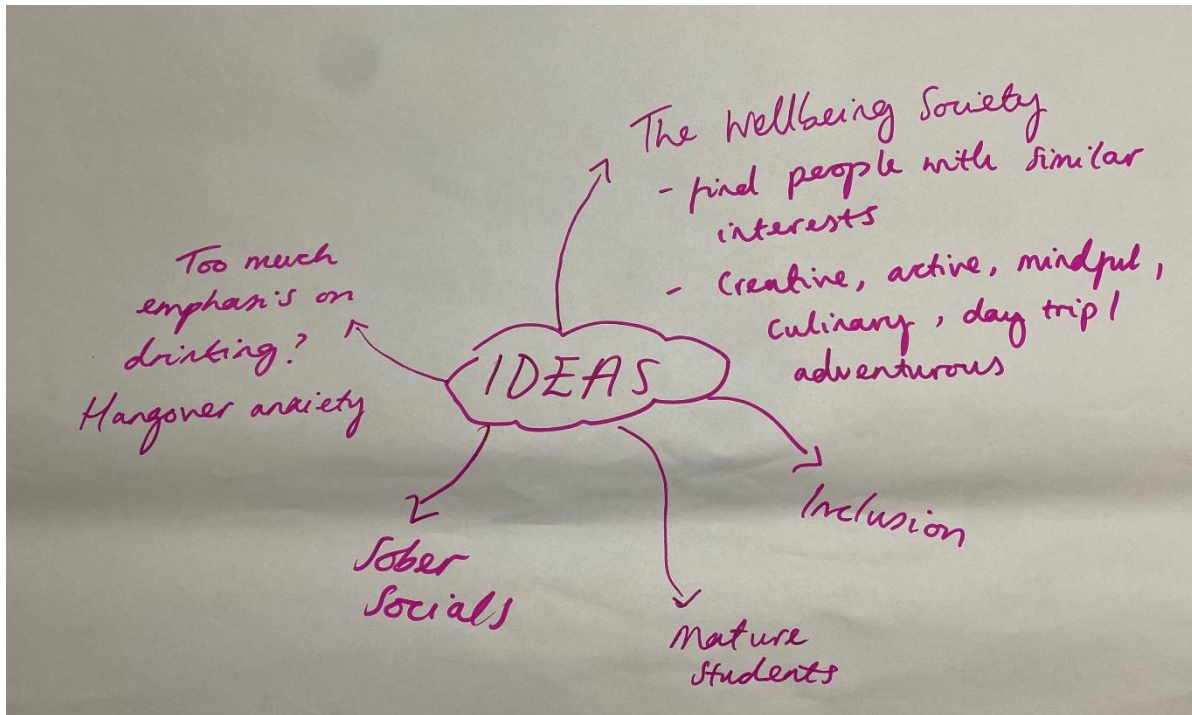
The student experience is shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors that all impact wellbeing in various, complex ways, but often the needs of students are simpler than we think. Through student-led discussions, the interventions that are being suggested to aid wellbeing are not clinical or medical such as counselling or therapeutic, but more social and community-based.

A central tenet among all the discussions was that students want student-led interventions. This indicates that students unanimously see the social support network as the most important in stabilising mental health and wellbeing. Students as well reasserted that they see an ideal wellbeing intervention as being fully capable within the existing HSU systems and services such as societies and GIAG events.

Wellbeing, as one student mentioned during a discussion, *“is not a one-size-fits-all”*, and despite the various ideas, it must be considered that the ideas presented are merely a starting point for thinking about what a revised wellbeing offer would look like. As this student mentioned:

“Regardless of what the output of this workshop is, we still need to think about how to tailor the individual needs of various students in whatever offer that we’re providing so it definitely helps students.”

Appendix A- Students' ideas of wellbeing interventions



Budget - It varies! 3 hours a week per staff member / people can pay society fees

Staff / student run? - mostly student run, staff member present
e.g. a student with more knowledge of art may want to lead a creative activity

How to engage people? -

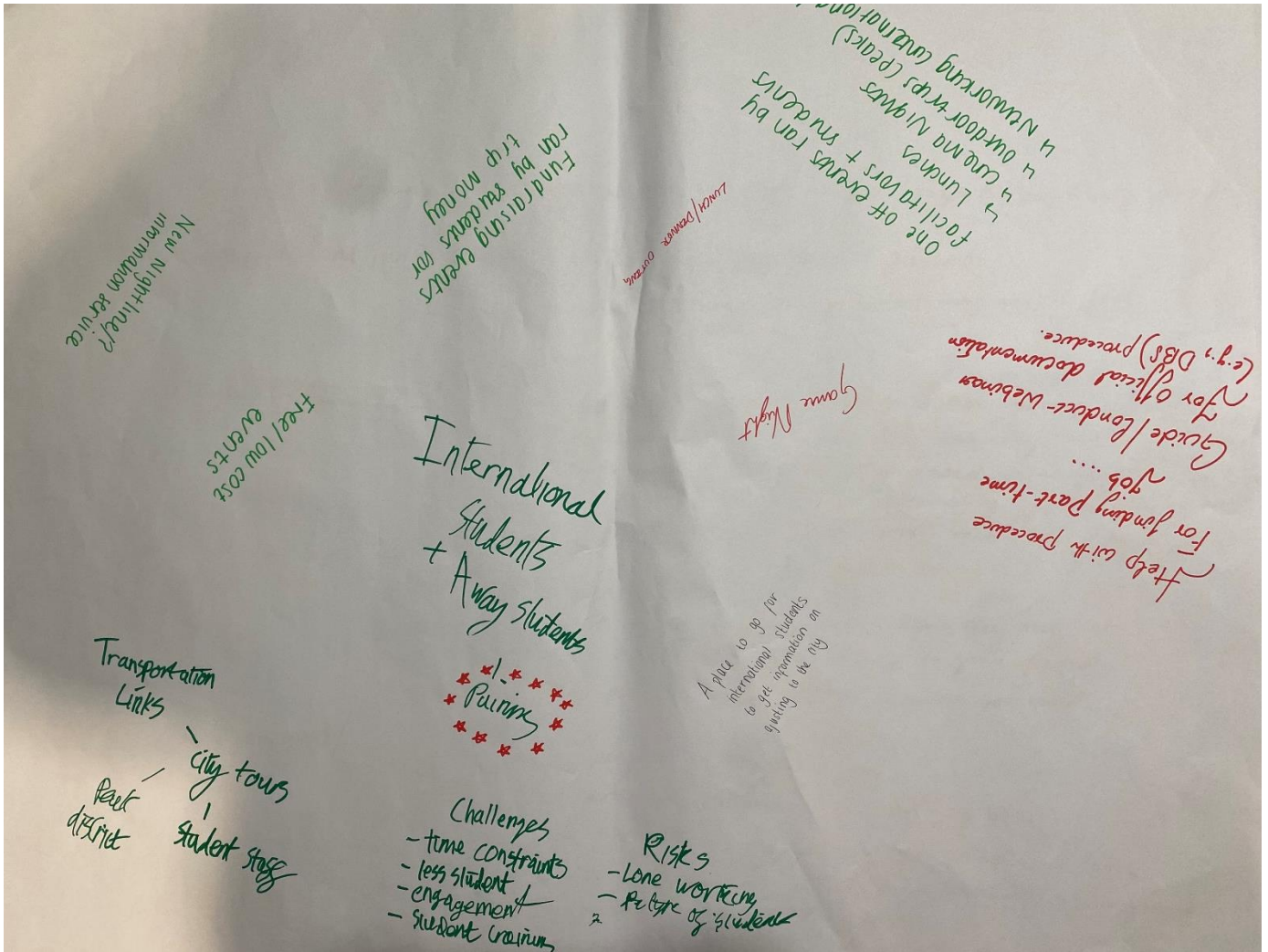
- A less formal version of social connection system
- Students may be referred by SHU wellbeing team
- Students matched with each other based on a questionnaire about preferred activities and personality types so they can meet people with similar interests - or try new things!

How will you know it's been a success? -

- Attendance
- People not coming may be a good sign - they may not need the service anymore or made a good friend.
- Open door policy - come and go whenever you want.

Challenges / Risks -

- Getting people to come
- Stigma around attending a wellbeing society
- Students finding time to attend around uni/work
- A group of students with low mood potentially a triggering environment
- Students nervous to attend alone the first time



- attendance - other commitments - commuting - going out +
 ↳ emailed a slot to choose around your timetable

problems solved?

- ↓ stress - catch it early
- ↑ confidence to join a group
- socialising ↑ between courses
- financial knowledge ↑ e.g., budgeting / loan
- having a plan for after uni.

may not have thought about joining

networking

Regular group meetings

Advertising?
- Everything!
- is it overhyped?

Light hearted
↓
take the next step

15 1-1 better?
(allegre)

different activities each week?

Ideas
- Well being has no 1 answer
- Academic performance links to well being

Point & Plant Pots
2 team members
↓
Students connect through activities

Events together
different groups?

Need Authority figures

Budget?
- free food boxes
- vouchers

Do students create pressure for each other?

Are existing teams active enough?
- well being
- chaplains

Budget
- An extension on existing resources

Success

Resources?
- Incorporate to Hallam SD app, websites

Problems solved
- Loneliness
- Social skills

Risk
- Boundaries
- teams!
- on app
- first names

Peer Connect
- Lunch
- Surveys
- No longer than a semester
- if they wait more, can be extended

Incentives?
- cakes, hot choc?
- pizza
- freebies?

Challenges
- Timetables (Day/Evening?)
- Quiet hour
5-6pm

Peer Connect buddies?
Mentorship?

Lunches?

Mini freebie fair?
- Games?
- Groups?
- online pairing system

App?
Student media
blackboard - outbreak

preventative wellbeing workshops

- compulsory → academic advisor - working with the uni
- opportunity for socialising 1st year, 2nd & 3rd
- mix of courses, diff students
- leads post grads? current students
 - ↳ relatable → experienced
- leads Student staff / Union past students / reps
- engage Social media & emails / induction lectures
 - ↳ timetabled, posters, union website
- 6 week compulsory, then optional
- chill vibe, music?, comfortable, sit on sofas
 - ↳ helps anxious students relax
- success? Survey after 6 weeks compulsory
 - ↳ within the session, opp. to ask questions.
- challenges anxious students → smaller groups, chill vibe, gender specific, group size?
 - ↳ or international
- risks compulsory → might be seen as forced informed consent.

FOOD
as incentives
e.g., cafe discount.
potluck bring own food

d
QR code

