

**Paper title:** Student mental wellbeing during a global pandemic: Leading a QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes Collaborative Cluster

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## Abstract

In the UK, pre Covid-19 pandemic, one in four students experienced a mental health difficulty, with 71% reporting that academic work from university is their main source of stress (Brown, 2016). Recent guidance from Student Minds (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) and Universities UK (2020) highlights the need for clarification of the role of academic staff in student mental health through appropriate training and development.

Hence, a QAA Scotland Collaborative Cluster on Student Mental Wellbeing and the Curriculum was formed as part of the 2017-2020 Enhancement Theme, *Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience*. The key work of this Cluster was to organise a series of professional development events for the higher education sector in order to develop the capacity of academic staff in their design of inclusive curricula, against the backdrop of a global pandemic.

In total there were 794 registrants across the four events from 141 different organisations across 22 countries, including Australia, Malaysia and Iceland, with 505 converting to attendee status, giving a mean registrant to attendee conversion of 64% (range 57%-71%). Academic staff formed 50% of registrants, followed by Professional Service staff (25%); Academic Quality and Academic Development staff (15%); and Student Officers and students (10%).

Across the four events there were 10 presentations/workshops with topics such as: the role of the academic and the curriculum; digital accessibility; 5 ways to mental wellbeing; personal tutoring; principles that support teaching, learning and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic; the connections between curriculum co-creation and student mental wellbeing; and compassionate assessment.

An electronic survey was distributed to all 794 registrants, to gauge the felt need for a student mental wellbeing special interest group. There were 85 respondents (10% response rate), with 88% from Universities. The survey indicated a continuing appetite and expressed need for work in this area to raise awareness of student mental wellbeing and equip staff and students in designing inclusive curriculum through further events, resources, working groups and collaborative research.

Therefore, it is recommended that continuing professional development work is carried out across the higher education sector in the aforementioned areas; additionally, providing a focus on specific groups of learners for whom mental wellbeing often is evidenced as a particular concern, for example, those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and LGBTQ+ communities.

## Introduction

In the UK, pre Covid-19 pandemic, one in four students experienced a mental health difficulty, with 71% reporting that academic work from university is their main source of stress (Brown, 2016). Universities are fully aware of their need to address the diverse range of mental health issues experienced by significant numbers of their students, and have been developing policies and ring-fencing resources to facilitate students' mental wellbeing. However, most of the resources, until recently, have been directed towards student wellbeing services, which have been struggling to cope with the increasing student demand.

For students, their curriculum and engagement with academics are the only guaranteed points of contact with their university (Hughes et al, 2018). Systematic review evidence shows that an inclusive curriculum that enhances the way students learn and academics teach promotes mental wellbeing (Fernandez et al, 2016). The design of the curriculum has a significant impact on the way that students respond to their course and academic staff. Therefore, Universities have been shifting their focus more to the role of curricula, including the role of academic staff, in supporting good mental wellbeing (Hughes et al, 2018).

There has been a drive over the past three years, in particular, towards a 'whole university approach' to student mental wellbeing, such as with Universities UK's Framework (UUK, 2020) and vision for universities to be places that promote mental health and wellbeing. This *Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities Framework* highlights the need for clarification of the role of academic staff in student mental health through appropriate training and development (UUK, 2020a).

In concordance with this, the *University Mental Health Charter* from Student Minds (Hughes & Spanner, 2019) acknowledges that any genuine whole university approach has to consider the role of academics and the curriculum in supporting good mental wellbeing (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). The Charter urges that the role of academics must be clarified, and staff must be guided to understand how they can support student mental health and wellbeing through good pedagogic practice. These practice areas are specified in Universities UK's recently published *Self-Assessment Tool* for mentally healthy universities to support improvement (UUK, 2020b).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has placed an unprecedented mental health burden on students (Grubic et al, 2020). Many are evidencing higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Wang et al, 2020), with 83% expressing worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions (YoungMinds, 2020) and a rise in isolation-induced loneliness (a recognised suicide risk) (Grubic et al, 2020). Thereby, increasing further the importance of designing inclusive curricula that impact positively on student (and staff) mental wellbeing.

Therefore, the aim of this project, which formed one of QAA Scotland's Collaborative Clusters from its 2017-2020 Enhancement Theme, *Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience*, was to build the capacity of academic staff to design curricula and create teaching and learning environments that are inclusive and promote student mental wellbeing. A secondary aim was to gauge the perceived need from across the higher education sector for a special interest group on the topic of student mental wellbeing.

## Methods

The Collaborative Cluster was led by Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), in collaboration with representatives from the University of Stirling, Heriot Watt University and sparqs. The original project plan was to organise two face to face professional development (PD) events.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred shortly after the first event; therefore, three professional development webinars were scheduled instead of the second face to face event.

### Promotion of the professional development events

In order to promote the events information was disseminated as broadly as possible via the following channels: QAA Scotland’s website/social media; project team members’ and speakers’ Twitter accounts; project team’s HEIs/Students’ Associations and personal contacts; SEDA@JISC and SHED@JISC mailing lists; and sparqs’ mailing list/Twitter. This approach appeared to be successful as three of the four events were oversubscribed and required waiting lists to be set up. A Twitter hashtag (#ThemesWellbeing) was set up that was used for promotion and during all the professional development events.

### Organisation types

In total there were 794 registrants across the four events from 141 different organisations. Unsurprisingly, for a QAA Scotland event, 85% of registrants were employed in universities (Table 1), followed by Students’ Associations (5%) and Colleges (4%). ‘Other’ organisations (4%) included QAA Scotland, sparqs, Advance HE, the National Union of Students and several independent practitioners (1%).

**Table 1: Breakdown of organisation types**

Organisation Type	No.	%
<b>University</b>	672	85%
<b>Students' Association</b>	41	5%
<b>College</b>	33	4%
<b>Other</b>	34	4%
<b>Independent/self-employed</b>	5	1%
<b>Unknown</b>	9	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Country of origin of registrants

The first event, which was face to face at Glasgow Caledonian University, was attended primarily by those from Scotland. Whereas the shift to webinars opened up the events to audiences from further afield (Table 2).

Overall there were registrants from at least 22 countries. Notably, the fourth event had registrants from at least 19 different countries from across the globe, primarily from Universities, including Australia, Malaysia and Iceland. There was representation across the four events from 521 registrants from Scotland from all but one of its 19 Universities - Queen Margaret University.

Table 2: Countries represented at each event

Country	Event 1 (F2F)	Event 2 (Webinar)	Event 3 (Webinar)	Event 4 (Webinar)	No.	%
Australia			2	1	3	0%
Bahrain				1	1	0%
Brazil				1	1	0%
Canada				1	1	0%
China		1	1		2	0%
England	1	10	13	93	117	15%
Germany				1	1	0%
Hong Kong				1	1	0%
Iceland				6	6	1%
India				1	1	0%
Ireland		1	3	14	18	2%
Malaysia				4	4	1%
Myanmar		1			1	0%
Netherlands				1	1	0%
Palestine				2	2	0%
Philippines				1	1	0%
Republic of Colombia				1	1	0%
Saudi Arabia		1	1		2	0%
Scotland	116	282	83	121	602	76%
Spain			1	2	3	0%
United Kingdom				5	5	1%
Wales				5	5	1%
Unknown	6	2	2	5	15	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>100%</b>

### Roles of registrants

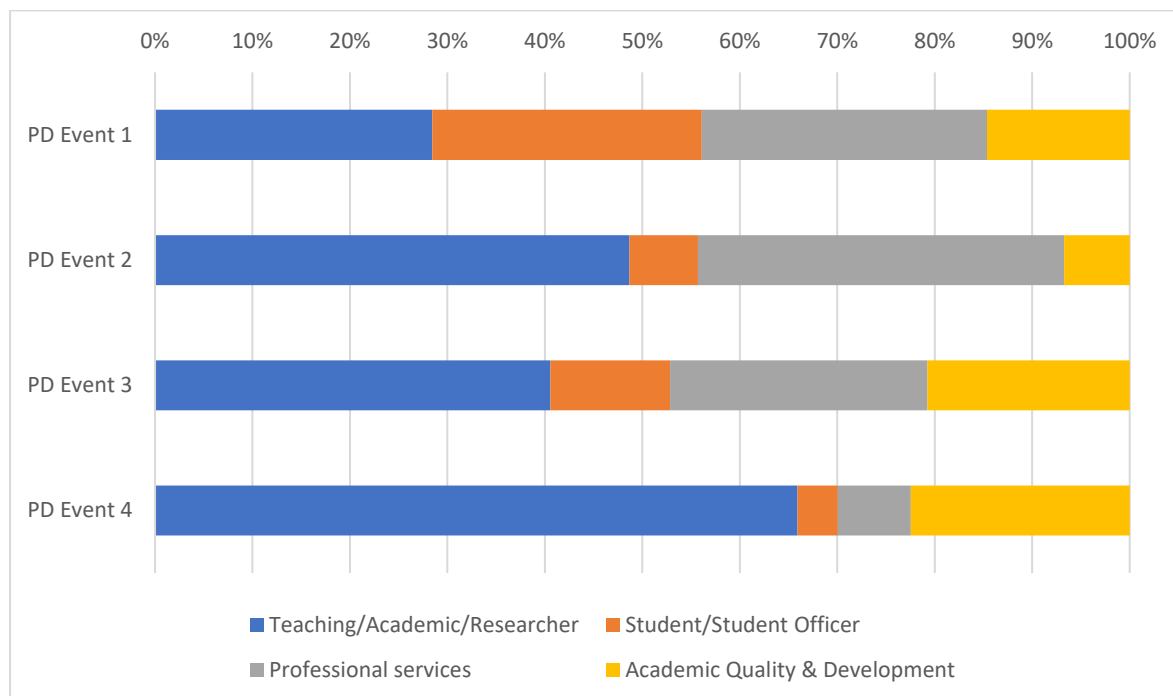
The majority of registrants were in academic/research positions (50%); followed by Professional Service staff (25%), such as those from Student Wellbeing, Disability Services, Counselling, Diversity and Inclusion, and Admissions; Academic Quality and Academic Development staff (15%); and Student Officers and students (10%) (Table 4).

Table 3: Registrants' job roles

Job Role	Event 1 (F2F)	Event 2 (Webinar)	Event 3 (Webinar)	Event 4 (Webinar)	No.	%
Academic/Researcher	35	145	43	176	399	50%
Professional services	36	112	28	20	196	25%
Academic Quality & Development	18	20	22	60	120	15%
Student Officer/Student	34	21	13	11	79	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>794</b>	<b>100%</b>

It was noted that the largest proportion of Professional Services staff attended the second event, which had a specific focus on student mental wellbeing and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the fourth event, which focussed on assessment, was primarily attended by academics and Academic Quality & Development (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Registrants by job role for each event**



### Registrant to attendee conversion

The number of registrants that attended each event are outlined in Table 5. The total number across all events was 794, with 505 converting to attendee status. The mean registrant to attendee conversion was 64% (range 57%-71%), noting that the face to face event had a higher attendance rate than the webinars. The webinar conversion rates of 57%-64% are considered very reasonable, as evidence suggests that for events with >100 registrants the average conversion rate is 43% and webinars on continuing education average at 37% (ON24, 2020).

**Table 4: Registrant vs. attendee numbers at each PD event**

Event	Type	Registrants	Attendees	Attendance Rate
PD Event 1	F2F	123	87	71%
PD Event 2	Webinar	298	190	64%
PD Event 3	Webinar	106	60	57%
PD Event 4	Webinar	267	168	63%
<b>Total</b>		<b>794</b>	<b>505</b>	<b>Mean = 64%</b>

### Topics for professional development events

Details on the professional development events' themes, speakers and session topics/objectives are outlined in Table 6. The programme was the fullest for the initial one-day face to face event, which included two interactive workshops in the afternoon. Across

the four events there were 10 presentations/workshops covering a wide variety of themes in relation to factors that can impact upon student mental wellbeing. The themes for the second to fourth events were developed in response to expressed needs due to a) the onset of the global pandemic and b) the World Café during the first event.

**Table 5: Event details**

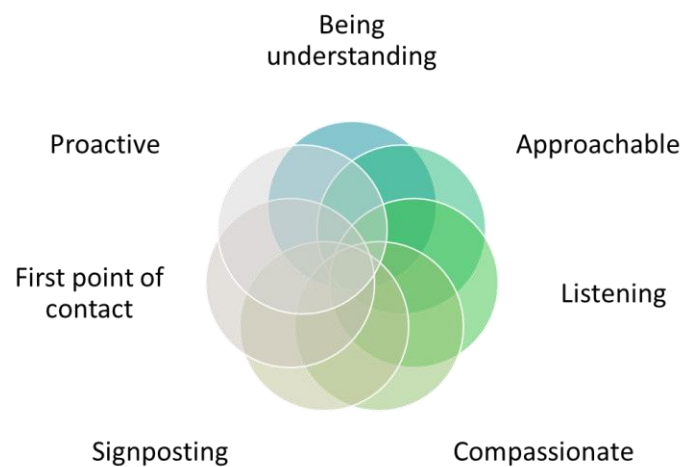
Event	Event Theme	Speakers	Session Topics/Objectives
<b>PD Event 1</b>	An inclusive curriculum to promote student mental wellbeing	Gareth Hughes University of Derby/Student Minds	Student wellbeing & student learning
		Ros Walker University of Stirling	Digital accessibility for student wellbeing
		Stef Black sparqs	Addressing student mental wellbeing from a learning & teaching perspective
		Pauline Hanesworth SRUC	5 ways to mental wellbeing workshop
		Catriona Cunningham University of Stirling	Role of the academic/curriculum & student mental wellbeing world café event
		Rob Daley Heriot Watt University	Are you OK? PhD supervisors & mental health of international students
		Annette Davidson Robert Gordon University	Personal tutors: key players in the promotion of student mental wellbeing
<b>PD Event 2</b>	Student Mental Wellbeing and Teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic	Gareth Hughes University of Derby/Student Minds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some of the early evidence about how students are experiencing the impact of the Covid-19 crisis</li> <li>• Some principles that may support teaching, learning and wellbeing during this crisis</li> <li>• Some myths about students and online learning that can have negative impacts on you and your students</li> <li>• The importance of staff wellbeing</li> <li>• Reasons to be hopeful</li> </ul>
<b>PD Event 3</b>	Curriculum Co-Creation and its Potential for Transforming Student Wellbeing	Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka University of Edinburgh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key principles of curriculum co-creation</li> <li>• Practical examples of co-creation practices and outcomes</li> <li>• The connections between curriculum co-creation and student mental wellbeing</li> </ul>
<b>PD Event 4</b>	Compassionate Assessment Post Covid-19: Improving Assessment Long Term	Sally Brown Independent Consultant in Learning, Teaching and Assessment and Emerita Professor at Leeds Beckett University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we mean by compassionate assessment?</li> <li>• How might we make the design, formats and delivery of diverse forms of assessment less stressful for students and staff?</li> <li>• How might we need to modify the language of assessment, making it more authentic?</li> </ul>

## Findings

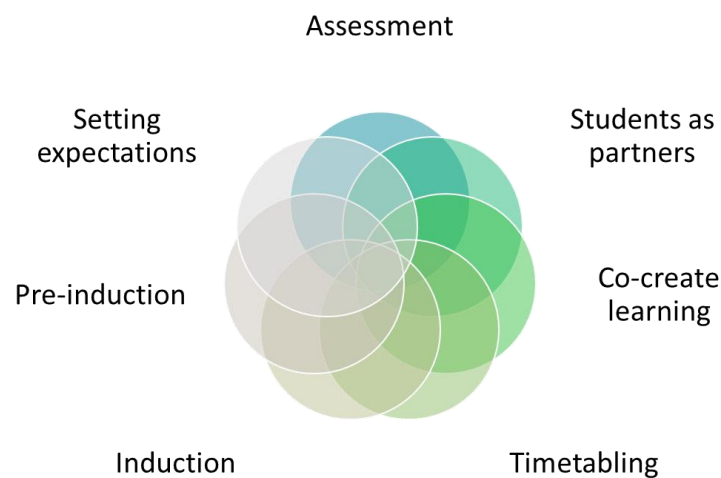
### World Café workshop

During the first event a World Café workshop was run with 11 tables, each with around six delegates, who were asked to record their responses to three questions. The summary responses for each question are presented below. These responses were then used to inform the topic areas for the subsequent webinar series, i.e. focussing on compassion; partnering for learning and teaching; co-creation; and assessment.

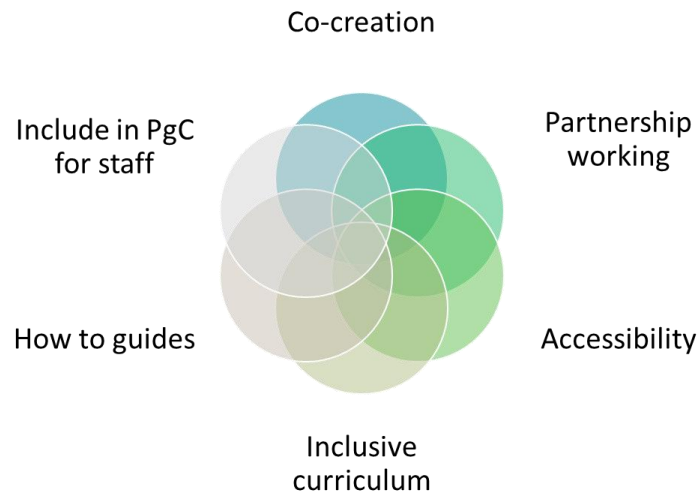
1. What do you feel is the **role(s) of the academic/teaching staff** in responding to student mental wellbeing?



2. In what ways do you feel **curricular design could be enhanced** to support student mental wellbeing?



3. What **key resources, support and/or training** would help you co-design curricula that support the development of student mental wellbeing?



#### Key messages & resources from the Collaborative Cluster work

All the presentation slides, resources and recordings from the professional development events are openly available on QAA Scotland's Enhancement Themes website - <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/evidence-for-enhancement/student-engagement-and-demographics/student-mental-wellbeing>

A summary of the key messages from the four events is provided in Figure 2.



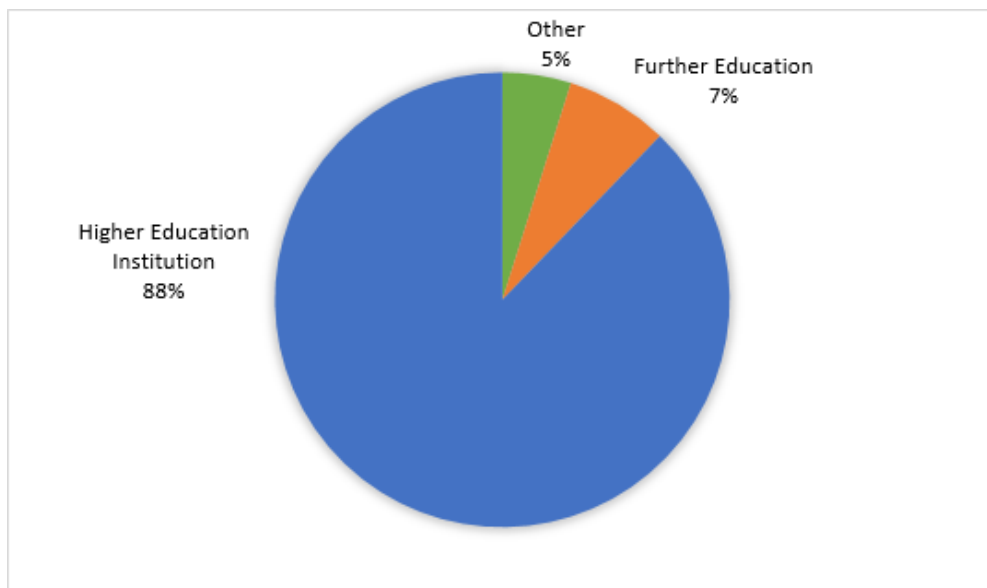
**Figure 2: Summary messages for staff from professional development events**



### Scoping of interest for a Special Interest Group (SIG) on student mental wellbeing

The secondary aim of the Collaborative Cluster was to gauge the higher education sector's perceived need for establishing a SIG in relation to student mental wellbeing. Therefore, a short electronic survey using Microsoft Forms was developed that was distributed to all 794 registrants across all events, of which 85 responded (11% response rate – not unreasonable for an electronic survey), mainly from Universities (88%). The breakdown of respondents is presented in Figure 3.

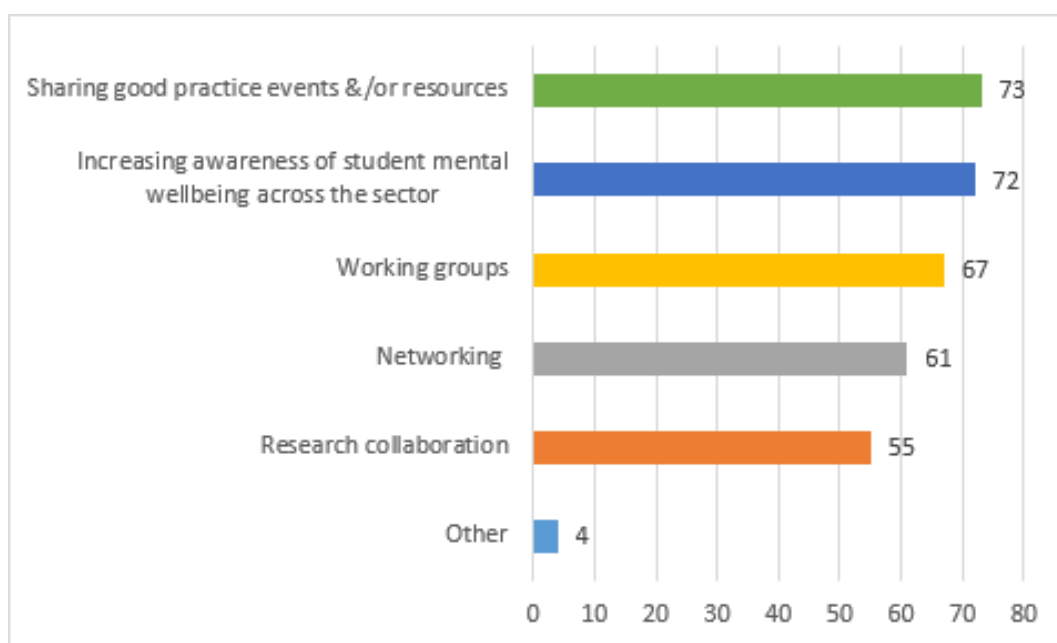
**Figure 3: Respondents for SIG survey**



Respondents were asked to select from provided options with which types of activities they would like to participate (Figure 4). There appears to be a continued appetite across the sector for sharing of practice events and/or resources, with an ongoing need to increase the awareness of student mental wellbeing.

The four 'other' types of activities proposed were: shared development of university suicide prevention guidance; attending more student mental health webinars; local networking within NHS Mental Health trusts; and training and workshops.

**Figure 4: Proposed types of activities for SIG**



## Conclusions

Undoubtedly, particularly given the onset of the global pandemic with its ongoing uncertainty, the topic of student (and staff) mental wellbeing is critically relevant; therefore, it is not surprising that the Collaborative Cluster’s professional development events were well attended, from a wide range of countries, and received positive feedback. A positive feature of the events was that there was engagement from staff and students from a wide range of roles across institutions and Students’ Associations.

Evidenced by the results of the SIG survey, there appears to be an appetite for continuing work in this area to raise awareness of student mental wellbeing and equip staff and students in designing inclusive curriculum through further events, resources, working groups and collaborative research.

## Future recommendations

Taking into consideration the appetite and expressed needs of attendees of events and survey respondents, it is recommended that continuing professional development work is carried out across the higher education sector in the aforementioned areas. In addition to the presence of the pandemic, students with protected characteristics such as ethnicity (in particular BAME) and sexual/gender identity (LGBTQ+) are further impacted negatively with regard to student mental wellbeing and sense of belonging. Therefore, there is a need to focus on these groups of learners during future professional development events.

In relation to mode of delivery, the use of webinars, rather than face to face events, brings many advantages, such as widening access, engaging participants in chat and question and answer functions, and facilitating recording and curation. Therefore, it is recommended that these are continued in future professional development events, making use of ever-ongoing technological enhancements as they become available.

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