The Flourishing University
‘Crisis on campus’ in student mental health?

University mental health services face strain as demand rises 50%

Figures show significant rise over five years, with more first-year and international students seeking counselling

Number of university dropouts due to mental health problems trebles

Data shows record 1,180 students who experienced mental ill health left courses early in 2014-15, up 210% from 2009-10

YOUNG VOICES
Four In Five Students Experienced Mental Health Issues In The Last Year, Says NUS Report

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Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia

University staff battling anxiety, poor work-life balance and isolation aren't finding the support they need
Should the response be simply ‘more counselling’?

Many universities need to triple their spending on mental health support: urgent call for action in new HEPI paper

This makes well-being something *peripheral* to the university’s main focus of research and teaching
Some UK universities trying to make well-being / flourishing a more central part of their strategy (as it often is in US universities)
The stepchange in student mental health begins with higher education leaders adopting mental health as a strategic imperative. (Universities UK, 9/17)

Universities should make the issue a strategic priority and adopt a whole-university approach based on prevention and promotion. (IPPR 9/2017)
29% of universities have a ‘well-being strategy’

**Mission**
To promote and enhance wellbeing across the University of Manchester through the development of a proactive and enabling culture, under the provision of effective leadership, management and support.

**Wellbeing Strategy Statement**

**Introduction**
The University is committed to providing a healthy working environment and improving the quality of working lives for all staff. The wellbeing strategy aims to support the University’s mission and core values of freedom of thought and expression, freedom from discrimination and the recognition that the University’s staff are its greatest asset.

43% offer content / courses on well-being
University of Buckingham to become Europe’s first Positive University
The idea that one of HE’s mission is ‘flourishing’ is not entirely new
Academy / Lyceum (c.400BC) tried to create an *askesis* for wisdom and healing.
From the Middle Ages to mid-19th century, one of the main aims of HE was to develop Christian character

‘Wisdom’s workshops’
Pope Gregory IX
Liberal Protestant universities became more secular and research-focused from mid C19.

But they still tried to foster ‘character’, ‘virtue’ ‘flourishing’ or ‘bildung’

‘The moral purpose of a university should be to train young men...The whole work is uplifting, refining, spiritualizing’

(Charles Eliot, Harvard president)
Some American universities still aspire to that mission
Rise of the Multiversity since 1960s

- who pays for mass higher education?
  what’s it meant to do? is it succeeding?

- much larger and more diverse student body;
  harder to agree on ‘core curriculum’
Liberal arts ideal out-dated?

- Since 1970, % of students who rate ‘being very well off’ as ‘very important’ has risen from 36.2% to 73.6%, while those who attach similar importance to ‘acquiring a meaningful philosophy of life’ has fallen from 79% to 39.6%.
Problems with UK universities’ well-being strategies

- they can be simplistic, instrumental, scientistic and illiberal (we the scientists can define and measure well-being)
- they can over-individualize well-being and ignore socio-economic conditions (your well-being is your responsibility)
- they can focus on one group (students) and not others (staff, faculty, society)
- they can be window-dressing
- lack of data: we don’t know what’s the problem or what works as a solution
Building a ‘whole university’ approach is hard

So many different individuals, departments, relationships, agendas... Westeros is basic in comparison!
A good HE well-being strategy might balance...

- research / practice
- sciences / art & humanities
- techniques / values
- quantitative / qualitative evidence
- online / offline
- staff / students / wider society
- high-level support with input from every other level
- well-being / discomfort
Aims of today

- Consider HE wellbeing from multidisciplinary perspectives
- Help ourselves and each other in our work
- Foster a research network / blog / essays
- Enjoy ourselves