

*This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Social Work Education on 14/12/2020, available online:*

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02615479.2020.1861242?journalCode=cswe20>

‘This is my oasis’: an exploration of student hub support for social work students’ wellbeing

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### **Abstract**

Emotional wellbeing is seen as a critical part of becoming a ‘professional’ and increasingly linked to suitability for the profession. With Social Work England’s clarity on student wellbeing as a university responsibility to enable and to assess, it is critical for social work education to consider innovative design in supporting professional and personal transformational learning. What is evidenced, is students’ mental health is poorer when compared to their non-student peers. What is less known, is the unique nature of mental health and wellbeing among those students studying for professional degrees, such as social work. A qualitative multiple-method research study explored the role of student hubs within a Social Work Teaching Partnership in England and examined whether they supported student social workers wellbeing. A three-stage approach involved semi-structured interviews with Practice Education Leads as facilitators of the hubs, a qualitative questionnaire and focus groups with student social workers. Thematic analysis of the findings created four major themes which have been developed into ‘The 4 Cs Model of Wellbeing Education’ involving Clarity, Community, Connections and Creativity. The research proposes learning and strategies that can be transferable to health, education and other professional degrees.

### **Introduction**

Wellbeing is a term that has been used interchangeably with mental health and resilience over recent years and in particular in human service professions. As a concept, it is crucial throughout a student social worker’s educational and professional career, influencing students’ ability to complete their studies (Lewis & Cardwell, 2019) and following on from this, career longevity. It is critical for students to be supported to develop strategies from the outset with employer organisations and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) providing structures of support from the beginning of a student’s professional development (Grant, 2014). This article presents findings from a qualitative multiple-method study exploring the extent to which student hubs support wellbeing in a Social

Work Teaching Partnership (SWTP). A SWTP involves bringing local authorities and universities closer together through a formal arrangement and funding to deliver more practice-focussed education. Student hubs, developed by a SWTP and supported by the HEI's involve group sessions with students and a facilitator with a focus on the practice and learning experience. This research did not define wellbeing for the students or practice education leads (PELs). It contains student reflections useful to other programmes supporting students to navigate regulator expectations of social worker wellbeing. A link is specifically made with England's emphasis on student social worker wellbeing as evidenced by the student-specific Social Work England (2019, p. 30) Qualifying Education and Training Standard 5.3:

Ensure that there is a thorough and effective process for ensuring the ongoing suitability of students' conduct, character and health.

With student social worker wellbeing being central to Social Work England's assessment of suitability, there has never been a clearer time to consider supportive measures to enable learning for professionalism.

### **Background**

A review of the literature found several themes linking what is known to support wellbeing and factors conducive specifically to learning and social work education.

### **The context**

The last ten years have seen a steady increase in discussion of the 'problem of' or 'how to solve' wellbeing (Allin & Hand, 2014; Cummins, 2010; GuildHE, 2018). This same period has seen a sharp rise in research aimed at measuring wellbeing (Auerbach et al, 2018; Dodge et al., 2012; Forgeard et al., 2011). Interest in wellbeing has developed across public policy in the UK, the scale of policy and media discussion has increased in the last five years in education and specifically higher education (Bache & Reardon, 2016). A review of the literature shows little evidence of why wellbeing has become such a dominant discourse in higher education (HE). Grant and Kinman (2014) and Bache and Reardon (2016) highlight that there is little research on course-level wellbeing strategies and none specifically in relation to social work education. The literature appears to focus on presenting wellbeing as a problem requiring a solution though not from a shared definition of wellbeing and not examining contributing factors (Barkham et al., 2019, p. 4). The literature is also limited in terms of examining the experience of wellbeing inputs based on student identity or course-specific to social work (Emirbayer & Williams, 2005). What is evident is wellbeing is a nexus between pedagogy and workplace paradigms marrying individual and 'duty of care' concerns. As Howe (2008) states, social work is a stressful profession so being emotionally aware is essential.

### **Student wellbeing**

The mental health of students in HEI's has been identified as an important public health issue (Brown, 2016; GuildHE, 2018). In the UK, there are key policy initiatives being rolled out across providers funded by UK Research and Innovation to support research into student mental health, such as the Student Mental Health Research Network [SMaRteN] (2019) and the government-directed University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). Alongside the rise in discussion of wellbeing, GuildHE (2018) found the majority of HEIs did not have a formal definition of wellbeing and that it was often conflated with mental health and mental wellbeing. They found strategies inconsistent with some HEIs having a whole institution approach to others focusing on a departmental level, with some only on specific courses on an individual level. GuildHE (2018, p. 35)

made ten recommendations for further research with the first being to 'define wellbeing and wellbeing strategies'.

Our review of the literature shows an emphasis towards measuring wellbeing and the impact of wellbeing strategies. While mental wellbeing is a question on the form students use to apply for a place at a UK university, this information is not shared with receiving universities though concerns of under-reporting question the validity even if it were to be shared (GuildHE, 2018). Neves and Hillman (2018) noted student mental health was poorer than for their non-student peers. Barkham et al. (2019) noted, while there was a breadth of measurement of student wellbeing, there was disconnection between the survey-based research reports including using different terms for wellbeing and relying on self-selection. Even so, Auerbach et al. (2016) concluded student wellbeing is of particular concern, due to academic pressures, difficulty to adjust to student life and financial pressure, with counselling services reporting increasing numbers of student approaches (SMaRteN, 2019).

### **Student social worker wellbeing**

Our review of social work wellbeing literature was limited to UK publications in the last 5 years. Social work is widely considered a stressful profession (Travis et al., 2016) with sickness and burnout specifically being frequently documented as a consequence of social work practice in the UK (Crowder & Sears, 2017; Ravalier, 2017). While outside our inclusion criteria, we acknowledge research into this area is of international interest (see Grise-Owens et al., 2016; Senreich et al., 2020 for US insights as example). The demands of this profession lead to Curtis et al. (2010) finding a social worker's career span to be on average seven and a half years, which raises questions over the personal and professional costs of committing to this vocation. More recently, 'social work as stressful' was characterised in the media in Community Care (2018) headlining their reporting of Ravalier's (2017) findings of 'majority of social workers looking to leave their job within the next 16 months'. In social work, there is a critically interesting parallel in narratives around sickness absence and burnout with an established concern about levels of burnout and sickness (Travis et al., 2016). Burnout is described as an accumulation of stress to toxic levels (Grant & Kinman, 2014). The British Association of Social Workers [BASW] (2018) in the Stress: Are we coping? Report analyses wellbeing concerns about service users and staff. Included in the seven recommendations to tackle stress is a call for the Health and Safety Executive to consider workplace stress a psychological hazard. Similarly, improving social worker wellbeing has been linked to reducing sickness to ensure robust service level provision. However, nationally, sickness absence has been falling; halved since records began in 1993 (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2018) with Ravalier (2017) marking 'presenteeism', or attendance at work while ill, as in fact a primary concern in social work. With sickness often presented as a net cost to the economy of days lost (Javaid, 2018), social work rates are higher than the private sector. However, while the ONS (2018) defined a day as 7.5 hours, the workers' union, Unison (2017) surveying members, reported social workers worked an average 9.5 hours a day, 17% saying they worked 12 hours or more and 16% saying they worked at least 15 hours a day. The latter figure equates to 16% of respondents working the equivalent hours of two social workers. Considering social work has inherent stressors in working with the most vulnerable in our communities, critically there is the question whether social work itself is stressful, or the stressors are in the way it is delivered. Similarly, should wellbeing in social work education be concerned with preparing students for practice or does there need to be a shift in focus towards the way in which it is practiced? Irrespective of the debate, the literature supports the need for wellbeing-specific input into social work education as preparedness for practice and as a duty of care.

## **Wellbeing in social work education**

The language of workforce wellbeing has seen a shift from 'a good life' to 'professional governance' in that wellbeing becomes both a measurement of suitability and performance (Bache & Reardon, 2016). Edley and Litosseliti (2010) assert that words are never neutral so the rise in the concept of 'struggling students' is concerning (Finch, 2017), where the emphasis is evident that the 'struggle' sits with the student. Social work education focuses on developing reflexive and empathic skills. Wellbeing in social work education, students are encouraged to consider self-awareness and reflexivity in self-care. In part this supports personal wellbeing as well as insights into how to support the wellbeing of those they work with. In working towards becoming a social worker, students share they experience emotional anxiety and unease when working with distress (Finch, 2017). The literature raises concern that while transformational learning on social work courses can be empowering they can also be emotionally challenging for students. This underlines the need for clarity when teaching wellbeing skills hereby containing self-exploration as safe practice. Prefacing his exploration of professional wellbeing, Newell (2017, p. IV) quotes Charles Figley, who explored compassion fatigue: The capacity for compassion and empathy seems to be at the core of our ability to do the work and at the core of our ability to be wounded by the work. Being 'wounded' by social work is a theme in the literature with wellbeing increasingly being considered across education and social work specific programmes. Cognitive 'over' load (Sweller, 1988) is spoken of in terms of juggling academic and life pressures (Finch, 2017). The literature adds to the impact of working with the most vulnerable in society— trauma being both vicariously experienced (Travis et al., 2016) but also potentially touching on the trauma intersectional students bring with them to their studies (Crenshaw, 1989). Thomsen (2002) considers character education to be key to developing professional self-knowledge in order to balance emotional availability while being boundaried, in turn linking back to the seminal research of Rogers (1961), which, in this research, is applied to how hubs might support students in becoming social workers.

## **Teaching partnership**

Established in 2016, this Social Work Teaching Partnership (SWTP), builds on national guidance for local innovation. It is a creative, collaborative model connecting two universities and two local authorities in England. The SWTP is a Department of Education (DfE) funded scheme and designed to strengthen social work education. The primary aim is to teach social work students collaboratively whilst on placement, to better prepare them for the workplace, through being practice-focussed and arguably, employer-led (Baginsky et al., 2019). Although the idea of relationships between local authorities and universities is not new (Munro, 2011), the collaboration has brought resources and a stakeholder commitment to work in partnership focussing towards increasing quality social work training throughout all levels within the organisations. Figure 1 represents the set-up of this SWTP. Practice Education Leads (PELs) are employed by the local authority under the umbrella of the SWTP in a role to support practice educators and student social workers. The PELs are responsible for developing, facilitating and co-ordinating student hubs, a strategy implemented by the SWTP and supported by the HEI's in response to the needs of the workforce and placement experience. The concept of the hub was developed by social work practitioners with practicedevelopment lead roles to support students to bring together their learning in university and on placement. The hubs themselves are small groups where students meet at scheduled points across their placement. The hubs are themed to develop learning at each stage of the placement, with an overarching theme of improved wellbeing through developing a safe space to reflect and share, reflecting the educationalist, Knowles's (1980) belief that a learning space should be 'one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected and supported' (p. 47).

## **Student hubs**

Student hubs are regular, face-to-face, group sessions involving a PEL as facilitator and student social workers as attendees. The purpose of the hubs is to narrow the gap between the learning at University and what student social workers are doing in placement. The PELs (n = 5) agreed the following three intentions of the hubs: (1) To promote a learning culture—to support and advise students whilst on placement through improving the quality of the practice learning experience and promoting learning whilst on placement, particularly focussing towards the application of theory to practice, reflection and evidencing an evidence-based social work skills framework linked to UK specific Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW, 2016) and Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS). (2) Support placements—to monitor the progress of the placement and provide support to Practice Educators. (3) Peer support—to facilitate an environment where peer-based learning and support can occur. Student hubs are delivered differently across the two localities. In one local authority (A), two PELs (1A and 2A) delivered student hubs which take place once every six weeks for two hours in four locations with student attendee numbers ranging up to forty. The hubs comprised a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking initial 70- day and final 100-day placements. The hubs are standardised with a range of themes including professional boundaries, data protection and social media. In the other local authority (B), three PELs (3B, 4B and 5B) delivered student hubs which take place monthly for two and a half hours with student numbers typically between four to twelve attendees. The hubs addressed two placement cohorts (September and January), and as such, the PELs facilitated separate hubs for undergraduate and postgraduate students during both of these periods. Content is developed alongside the students and is individual to each hub, although there may be some overlap depending on attendee responses. Sessions included creative tools, communication and difficult conversations. It should be noted that the size of the student group was such that a breakdown in personal characteristics such as gender or race would have compromised student confidentiality by rendering a proportion identifiable. While not the intention of this study, a larger study would be valuable to explore how wellbeing education is experienced in light of lived experience. The hubs run while students are on placement and although the hubs are not mandatory, there is a strong emphasis on attending the hubs as part of student practice days. They are interactive, with PELs sharing their hub resources with the practice educators, on-site supervisors and student social workers within their hub localities to support the development of knowledge and understanding. The hubs are open to students across different universities e.g. Open University (OU), etc., who are on placement in either of the local authorities.

## **Research design**

This exploratory qualitative study involved a multiple-method approach (Bryman, 2016) involving three methods of data collection:

- (1) Semi-structured interviews with the Practice Education Leads (PELs) to explore their experience of developing and running student hubs.
- (2) Student questionnaire with open and closed questions, drawing on the student experience and perspective within the student hubs.
- (3) Focus groups with students to communicate and triangulate the findings drawn from the first two data collection methods.

The rationale for choosing a combination of research methods supported a wider coverage of the research data and triangulation of the findings (Morgan, 2014). The three different means of data collection allowed multi-layered perspectives to be drawn from the research and opportunities for

participant involvement within the structure of the research design. For example, within the semi-structured interviews, the PELs could suggest a question to be considered within the student questionnaire.

The aim of this research project was to explore whether student hubs contribute towards supporting student social workers' wellbeing. The following two objectives were identified:

- (1) To explore how the structure, content and framework of Teaching Partnership student hubs address the wellbeing needs of social work students.
- (2) To critically explore how the Teaching Partnership student hubs are delivered and the support being offered to students.

Ethical approval was granted in December 2018. Principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, confidentiality, informed consent and the right to withdraw drawn from the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research (NHS Health Research Authority, 2017) underpinned ethical conduct within the study and were communicated to participants through tailored Participant Information Sheets, Informed Consent Forms and finally, verbally, if appropriate. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, anonymised, transcribed and stored in line with General Data Protection Regulation guidelines (General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR], 2019). The research project involved voluntary participation and it was made explicit to the PELs that there was a risk of participant identification which applied to them due to the small number and specialist nature of their role. An ethical culture was maintained throughout the research, such as the primary researcher taking a secondary role in the focus groups to mitigate against being known to some students as their lecturer (Sobočan et al., 2018). In terms of positionality, the primary researcher is employed in one of the universities involved in the SWTP and the second researcher is employed at another university, not involved with a SWTP.

The first stage of data collection involved developing an interview schedule for the five semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) which were held with the PELs across the local authorities, and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis identified patterns within the data (see Appendix B) and produced a preliminary set of draft findings. Interviews took place in January 2019.

The second stage involved circulating a 10 question survey via the PELs to student social workers currently attending the student hubs. Questions included a mix of open and closed-questions and thematic analysis identified themes drawn from the fifty-three responses (29.4% response rate) and generated findings which were shared at the third stage. Questionnaires were sent and responses collected in February and March 2019. The survey queried subjective understanding of the term 'wellbeing' and the student's belief as to the contribution Hubs did or did not make and why.

The final stage involved holding two focus groups in May and June 2019 with student social workers which coincided with the end of the placement period. One focus group was held with fifteen participants and one with nine participants, to present and crosscheck the findings from the interviews and questionnaires. The focus groups were audio recorded with groupwork methods used to stimulate discussion (Litosseliti, 2003; Spencer, 2011)

The use of these three information sources enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, and enriched the data, leading to more insightful understandings (Sarantakos, 2013).

## **Limitations**

This research was not approved as a full evaluation of the student hubs. The research was suggested by the Principle Investigator who was completing a postgraduate teaching qualification with a research component. Both researchers have previously published a reflection on the role of teaching partnerships (Bald & Howells, 2019) and the local authorities agreed access at a time when SWTP funding was coming to an end with consideration being given as to whether the hubs might continue in their current form or stop. This research is a review of student experience of student hubs and learning may be drawn from the findings for future planning and hopefully may inform other programmes considering a similar model. It must be noted that this research does not set out to measure student wellbeing. However, the research focussed on exploring the role of the hubs in the context of wellbeing and as such, is a review of the framework of support offered to students, specifically connected to their wellbeing. The study was conducted in the second semester immediately prior to the end of the academic year. As such, it was important to be mindful of how the timing of the research may influence student participation and responses within the research process. There was limited feedback in the questionnaire and focus groups about the link with university. This may be due to both researchers being academics or that the hubs are situated in their placement locale. The absence was not identified at the time so no specific questions were added to address this point.

### **Overall findings**

This section presents our findings. Following initial thematic analysis and triangulation, we found there to be four common themes across the data: clarity, community, consistency and creativity. These themes were developed into The 4 C's Model of Wellbeing Education (see Figure 2). Each theme is presented broken down into sub-headings highlighting where good practice was found and recognising where students and PELs felt there were gaps or missed opportunities.

#### **Clarity**

##### ***Purpose***

*Good place for reflection (Student 21).*

*To help with explaining how my university course fits with placement (Student 18).*

*It gives some students almost something to ground them (sic) it's a space they've got that they can go to that's going to be reliable and predictable (PEL 3B).*

*When the boundaries are clear it should work really well, but often they are not clear enough (PEL 4B).*

Students felt some hubs were better than others. They shared that they were not always clear about the outcomes for the day but were largely happy to be guided. Some felt it would have been more useful to have clearly set out objectives in advance which led onto discussion about whether a set programme was better than perhaps a more organic group-led model. McFarlane's (2018) emphasises the need for educators to create spaces for developing learner identity. The learning space hubs provide was repeatedly said by students to be beneficial and where they can discuss concerns. Some students queried where the hubs sat between university and placement learning. While some felt there was too much of an overlap and were keen to learn about other aspects of practice, other students felt it beneficial to revisit learning. The hub's purpose can be seen to draw on Benjamin Bloom's taxonomies of learning through providing a formative space for deeper learning (Bloom et al., 1971). Similarly, there was evidence of David Kolb's learning model in that students spoke of learning styles and hubs providing the space to reflect in writing and group



discussion about a particular social work theory or practice area (Kolb, 1984). As such, the hubs provided opportunities which bridged experiential learning with wellbeing; an approach that is evidenced to enhance wellbeing (What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2018).

### **Openness & trust**

*The size of the initial hubs of 30–40 people in a room can be quite overbearing and the level of noise in the group was quite difficult (sic) in a group that size you don't feel safe (Student 1A).*

*Three things which I would take away from the hubs is peer support, a safe space to talk and a place of reflection (Student 6B).*

Students reported finding hubs worked best when they felt enabled to share their worries as well as their learning. Students shared feeling cared for in the hubs, with the hubs being described in terms of compassion. Compassion-based teaching is a developing area in the UK though known more in the United States, for example, Dalton and Fairchild (2004). Student feedback showed this was impacted negatively where the hubs comprised of larger groups or were open to changing membership. The forming stages of the hubs were valued by students (McNamara, 1999). Where a hub was established with a set student group, those attending noted they found they were able to share where practice had been unsettling or to ask advice. Others felt they were able to share with their practice educators or peers with the emphasis being on finding that 'safe space' to share. Establishing this openness and trust for these interactions to take place was highlighted, and it was identified that these areas were compatible with developing aspects of student wellbeing. From this, it was also evident in the feedback that the experience of the hub was shaped by the skill of the PEL.

### **Planning**

*Thinking about what it means to be a student on placement (PEL 4B).*

*If we knew what was going on each month, then we could come better prepared (Student 2A).*

While some students felt the time spent at the hub was clearly set out in terms of frequency, some felt they would benefit from being involved in the planning process itself while others hoped for sessions to be planned in advance. The majority of students (n = 52) felt the hubs were beneficial to their learning by being a supportive environment and what was evident in student feedback was a commitment to using hubs to revisit learning and reflection (Meyer & Land, 2005). As such, while PELs led hubs with a particular theme or area of practice, there was scope for hubs to move away from traditional banking education to one where students said they felt freer to explore their learning in a more transformational way (Friere, 2005). This meant that planning played out as a pathway to wellbeing, contributing to the importance in the design of the hubs to achieve connections with wellbeing.

### **Community**

#### **Community practice**

*The philosophy of getting people involved, inclusivity and student-led (PEL 5B).*

It was clear from the PELs point of view that several underlying principles guided the dynamics within the student hubs including the strive for the hubs to become an 'active community'. This involved students' taking responsibility for their role towards creating and leading a stimulating, safe and engaging learning space alongside the growth of new and existing relationships. Their purpose was experienced as different to anything found at university, moving away from a traditional

hierarchical regime similar to a teacher and student 'power over' relationship and towards students and PELs developing a shared power relationship, which the PELs felt helped demonstrate feelings of ownership of the hubs. This philosophy towards being 'student-led' allowed students to generate the hubs identity and model values inherent to social work, such as team working and problem solving. However, the creation of a space such as this, was difficult for some members of the hub to embrace due to differing learning styles with some students preferring a more didactic approach. The expertise and skills of the PEL, as facilitator and educator was evident as key from the outset:

*Some students are very much in school mode and expect to be taught, it's quite hard to ask them to think about their needs, how they want their hub to be and what their hub could be for them, when they think it's another class where they will be didactically talked to, and to turn that around is quite hard and needs to be done well in the first session (PEL 4B)*

This type and level of engagement, although potentially demanding allowed the construction within some hubs of more authentic dialogue and potentially, a more rewarding student experience with authenticity being key to enriching wellbeing (Sutton, 2020).

### **Community of meaning**

*This is my oasis; my place I can go to escape (Student 3A).*

Students across the focus groups (A and B) shared the importance of a sense of belonging within the hubs which supported their growth, engagement, development of skills and meaning-making in their practice. This was evident not only through social work students' belonging to a student community as described above, but also through being part of a workplace in human services, to understand the processes and their identity in the shared work-practice. As such, it was evident that nurturing a culture of belonging needed to take place at all levels within the academic, social and workplace community due to the central impact upon wellbeing. However, creating a sense of belonging required effort, practice and much more than delivering a set of student hubs. One recurring area drawn from participants' responses included the role of reflexivity:

*I think promoting reflexivity is really important in student hubs, in terms of student wellbeing. So, helping students getting to know themselves in practice. So, you know the impact of your own social [identity, sic] for example, on the way that you are feeling about a particular piece of work you're doing. The impact of power, the impact of your own values, beliefs and upbringing, those sorts of things. I think in terms of student well-being and that opportunity to be reflective and reflexive are really, really important (PEL 3B).*

All of the PELs outlined the importance of reflexivity with the majority (n = 4) suggesting that it was a multi-faceted concept that was more complex than being reflective and key in addressing wellbeing. The PELs emphasised how the role of power relates to knowledge, norms and narratives, and it was through drawing on the impact of student social workers' personal and social context that this could be addressed. All of the PELs (n = 5) agreed that students brought a bank of life experiences, including personal and academic content in the development of their beliefs and values. As such, some (n = 4) acknowledged their role as facilitators in encouraging student social workers to critically reflect about how they constructed their ideas and practice, whilst considering their influences of self, and their social and cultural position.

### **Community interaction**

*They waited for me to deliver some content (sic) so I think the bit about trying to gel and talk and derive support from each other is something that has to be over time (PEL 4B).*

It was clear from the triangulation of feedback that group formation relied on the interaction and communication within the hub and thus the facilitation skills of the PEL. The more interaction and channels of communication within the hub process, the more likely the hubs were valued and presented as an enriching experience for students to access opportunities to learn, grow and build social ties (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). For example, the hubs with more regular face-to-face contact and increased length in hours, seemed to present a strengthened community identity drawn from the student feedback which also showed that social interactions and wellbeing are mutually reinforcing. However, this also may have relied on smaller attendee numbers and differing environments.

*If we arrive to a classroom style subconsciously, I am thinking I am here to be taught (Student 4A).*

It was apparent from the student feedback from hub (A) that the PELs choice of a large room set up as classroom style implied to students the hub was a teaching space. Whereas, a more informal set-up created a very different atmosphere which led to more diverse interaction. In part, this was due to practicalities as one hub drew a larger number of students due to location so the room choice was to accommodate this. However, our findings showed that a smaller group in a smaller space was felt by students to better meet their learning needs.

*The hubs provide support from people who are in exactly the same position as you (Student 7B).*

The majority of students from both of the focus groups (n = 22) highlighted the importance of peer support and how the hubs provided an opportunity to access critical friendships to both empathise and develop greater self-awareness. Student feedback focussed on this type of support as being crucial for wellbeing, as it connected with their sense of belonging, feelings of safety and how students' felt towards the hub.

## **Connections**

### ***Relatedness***

*We needed to drill down with them and develop a relationship with them and really focus on the relationship of oneself to hub, and hub to oneself (PEL 4B).*

Both student (n = 46) and PEL (n = 5) feedback highlighted the role and different types of relationships within student hubs, from peers, to community and with the hub itself. Throughout the research, multi-layered connections emerged within the student hubs to give meaning to students work and experiences, whilst encouraging students' to remain responsive and engaged. For example, as one PEL outlined:

*Think back to when you first went for your interview and why you want to be a social worker . . . you need to keep asking that question . . . (sic) if you remember why you wanted to do social work, is that still true today, here, amongst it all? Is it still there? If it is, where do you see it around you? Is it happening on placement? Are you able to do any of that? Because if not, you need to go find it, because otherwise you're going to burn out (PEL 4B).*

This example from PEL (4B) highlighted the importance of the relationship between the use of self and the emotional connectedness to the work, as a key area that helped student social workers to further navigate their role, grow new skills and deepen their understanding. The PELs (n = 3) felt that the hubs provided a collaborative space to re-examine the notion of 'relatedness', for example, in exploring students' connections to their work and their drive to become a social worker. The PELs shared that this was an important element, particularly when considering a student's placement

experiences which could often involve periods of uncertainty and impact student wellbeing. The PELs (n = 3) felt that through encouraging students to re-connect and relate to their underlying motivations and purpose, this would contribute to maintaining their wellbeing.

### ***Theory to practice***

*Set in practice (sic) by looking at theory to practice (sic) it brings them back to the work that they are doing at university (PEL 5B).*

*It's something that aids them in their placement practice and something that's linked with the PE's and then the PE's can follow through and do more of, so that the learning is very much narrowed. I suppose we see it, the PELs see it as, we very much see it as we're trying to narrow the gap between theory and practice and trying to really support the students particularly to take theory into their practice education supervision and take their hub learning into their PE supervision because we're very aware that a lot of our local authority PEs struggle to do that because they haven't got the time to think about it properly (PEL 3B).*

The connection between theory to practice was a recurring aspect throughout both student (n = 32) and PEL responses (n = 5). The PELs focussed towards the importance of upskilling students' capabilities which ensured that their practice was focussed towards deepening their understanding of theoretical frameworks and not primarily guided by assumptions or beliefs, drawn from personal and professional experiences. The PELs (n = 3) outlined that familiarity with common, well-established theories supported the process of student social workers developing their knowledge and becoming effective in their roles thus scaffolding their wellbeing. One further advantage of the hubs outlined by the PELs (n = 2) involved encouraging students in their motivation to learning and becoming more self-directed in their learning with their Practice Educator. It could be suggested that this draws on similar principles and assumptions of adult learners found in Knowles theory of andragogy (2011).

Both the student and PEL feedback indicated that student hubs championed the development of a learning culture with explicit connections around education to theory, the PCF and KSS. The PELs (n = 4) articulated the fusion between theory and practice as representative of the student's relationship between their thinking and doing. The PELs (n = 3) were able to reflect back to the researcher that it was the integration of this knowledge and understanding (theory) with the action (practice) which was the foundation for sound professional practice. The development of this knowledge was seen to be linked with wellbeing through supporting student's power and control within their practice enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. The PELs (n = 3) shared that students were able to start to develop a critical curiosity to different theories as a basis for shaping their practice and build their credibility to other professionals, so that their practice became *informed*.

### ***Structure and safe space***

*It is a safe place for students to come and obviously you can't just say it's a safe space, you've got to create that (PEL 3B).*

*The hub has been helpful to safely discuss the difficulties faced as a student which helps to relieve anxieties by asking questions and talking to other students who are in the same position (Student 5)*

*If you are struggling or worrying about something, being able to speak to other people who may be going through the same difficulties (Student 11B)*

The physical aspects of the hub space played an important role in how safe students felt and impacted the level of community interaction, both aspects of which, that directly affected levels of wellbeing. Although the PELs took steps to address boundaries and activities in line with the creation of a safe environment, some students felt that they could not build trust amongst the group and share their views or experiences due to the size of the hub and the regularity of attendees. With students overall preferring a similar structure, smaller numbers and set groups when considering their learning needs.

## **Creativity**

### ***Research-led***

*People work in different ways and learn in different ways (Student 8B).*

*The hubs depend on the time, warmth and knowledge of the PEL (Student 9B).*

Students spoke highly of the PELs sharing the experience of the hubs was largely due to their skills and knowledge. PELs (n = 4) acknowledged students often reported feelings of being overwhelmed impacting their capacity to learn. While not referred to directly, managing capacity to learn or cognitive load was considered an inherent hub aim (Sweller, 1988). Many students felt the hubs filled a gap between lectures and practice by drawing on other learning theories and styles affording a greater depth of learning (Cooper, 1993). The students shared the value of PELs bringing current events or proposed changes in practice to the hubs. It was felt this supported wellbeing by having a safe space to explore the change and their experience of change. Some students shared admiration for their hub PELs sharing they felt safe and inspired highlighting the value where PELs considered the hubs more widely as their creative learning space (Friere, 2005).

### ***Tools***

*The hubs provide tools and techniques that we can take into practice and can really use (Student 11B).*

*The hubs provide more applied practice than being at university (Student 10B).*

All of the PELs (n = 5) used an extensive range of tools within the hubs. These were both theoretical and creative tools which students reported they could readily take into practice. While not all students were aware of wellbeing as an intention of the hubs, it was apparent they felt the practices shared could be used by themselves as well as with others. Developing a sense of self was evident in the hubs with students sharing that they felt more able to explore their growing sense of professional identity and self-concept in the hub environment (Upamannyu et al., 2014). There was creativity in the hubs with one PEL using hand cream as a tool to engage students in a check in process at the start of every session. Drawing on their knowledge of mindfulness techniques focusing on senses, students were asked to share an insight from their week after rubbing cream into their hands. This was established as the starting exercise of every hub and soon became a useful tool to enable transition from the bustle of placement into the hub learning space. Similarly, PELs were observed to use differing coloured sand and jars to capture endings as an exercise. Students reported valuing these practical tools as students and future practitioners.

### ***Flexibility***

*Sometimes it can feel quite rushed in two hours and we would like it if the hubs were more structured with a topic (Student 3A).*

*Placement can be quite hard and intense and the hubs relieve a bit of stress (Student 1A).*

Students valued the flexibility of the hubs model revealing that it played an important part in supporting student's wellbeing and could contribute towards techniques to manage stress. There was some difference of opinion as to whether the hubs should be student or PELs-led with the majority considering a balance of the two ideal. Most students felt regular attendance helped them get more out of the hubs, noting workload being a primary barrier offering it may be better to meet for a day as coming away from placement to attend was often difficult.

## **Discussion**

The student hub model offers a potential framework to support the development of community-based opportunities for student learning. It sits between university and placement affording a space to explore and consolidate learning from both. The hub model was found to be particularly beneficial to student wellbeing, meeting a need not fully met in lectures or in practice learning.

What was apparent was that students took their own wellbeing seriously. They valued the opportunity to work with their peers through unpicking practice learning which they may have felt less able to do in the classroom or placement. The non-judgemental aspect of the hubs allowed students to gain a depth of understanding while allowing for growing criticality. Student hubs as a learning and reflective space allowed students to be better equipped to manage the complexities of practice, through building their knowledge base, encouraging an openness to different theoretical and practice perspectives, and develop their skills and confidence.

However, it was clear that some hubs appeared to work better than others from the student perspective. The role of an experienced and knowledgeable PEL was critical to the experience of the hubs with other factors including numbers, frequency, consistency of membership and hub set-up playing a part. Findings indicated that students valued a PEL who created a safe space, so consistency mattered to them. When the group was larger, they noticed differing levels of investment by student peers which undermined students developing their practice, whilst also the management of a larger group become an additional burden for the PEL. Larger hubs also raised issues around boundaries and confidentiality with more opportunities for students to collude or conflict with one another. The smaller hubs were able to provide opportunities for the PELs to identify and discuss more complex practice issues and personal matters, such as mental health issues. Although, clear boundaries from the outset were required so that the hub and PEL provided further support to the student and did not come between the relationship between student and PE.

Creativity was valued by students as even when there was crossover with lectures or learning on placement, practicing their learning from a new perspective allowed deeper understanding. This was contradicted by some students who felt that this could have been better co-ordinated, however there was a sense with one group in particular, that the trust in the PEL was such that even repetition was valued. To undertake this type of practice and education, the space needed to be one of containment and trust where repetition, disagreements, different value systems and differing perspectives could be explored safely and bravely, and was highly reliant on a skilled PEL.

Developing hubs as safe spaces for learning, is directly linked with what is known to benefit learner wellbeing. While some students were concerned for duplication, others valued it for reinforcement, which may be related to their approach to learning. Some students appeared to benefit from an 'oasis', in having a space to sit and contemplate, while others saw it more as a chore or missed opportunity to do something else. In turn, this links to different learning styles which dominate for

different students and thereby suggest some students need to focus more on their reflective abilities for their own wellbeing while others may benefit from a practice-specific focus.

This approach also raises the question as to whether the student hub framework could be replicated as a virtual learning community (VLC). With the changing nature of spaces, digitalization and more diverse learning and community methods such as this, it is important to realise a VLC's potential to enhance community interaction, whilst also being mindful of the separation it can create.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Why does wellbeing matter for students?***

*It's massive, it's everything* (PEL 4B)

Student hubs are enmeshed with principles similar to a 'learning community' or 'communities of practice'; concepts commonly found in adult education focussed on collaborative and co-operative learning (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Similar elements found in both include emancipatory factors, power sharing and becoming a process for growth. However, the underpinning thread of wellbeing weaved through the hubs moves them beyond a straightforward learning method to holistically address the student's learning and emotional needs. Student hubs view wellbeing as being implicit within students' education and sets the emotional climate for the overall learning culture, in that for student's to be able to maximise and value their learning, their wellbeing needs to be addressed. To support the development of this process, the themes from the findings led to the creation of The 4 C's Model of Wellbeing Education (Bald & Howells, 2019).

Wellbeing is key in social work education and practice, with the process being developed throughout a student's professional development. This study contributes to the growing collection of evidence-informed interventions focussed on the contribution towards the wellbeing of student social workers, in addition to the hubs being considered as a strategy to support wellbeing. Its relevance is all the more critical given the shift in language and Social Work England's emphasis on student wellbeing as being a university responsibility to both enable and to assess.

Over the years, wellbeing dialogue has predominantly remained focussed towards the individual with less concern towards critically exploring the support structures in place. However, stronger narrative is emerging focussed on the roles and responsibilities of educators and employees towards their student cohort and future workforce. This research has highlighted the significance of hubs and their provision as a framework to address and enhance wellbeing. In future, the use of a more structured approach, through drawing upon The 4 Cs Model of Wellbeing Education will support and build upon the hubs, as a positive learning method and provide the foundations of a toolkit for facilitators, practitioners, students and PELs.

It is important that there is an increased emphasis towards how organisations and HEIs can support the wellbeing of students studying for professional degrees, where there is a gulf between *being* a student whilst *becoming* a professional. The findings of this research not only have implications for future learning and planning, but also provide insight and will be helpful to other teaching partnerships, social work courses and other professional degree courses, such as health and education. This research will help shape approaches and contribute to the implementation of strategies towards the wellbeing of their student population.

## **Acknowledgments**

Our deepest thanks to the students and Practice Education Leads who gave their time freely. Without their involvement, this research could not have taken place. To us, you are 'our oasis'.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Figure 1: The Umbrella of SWTP

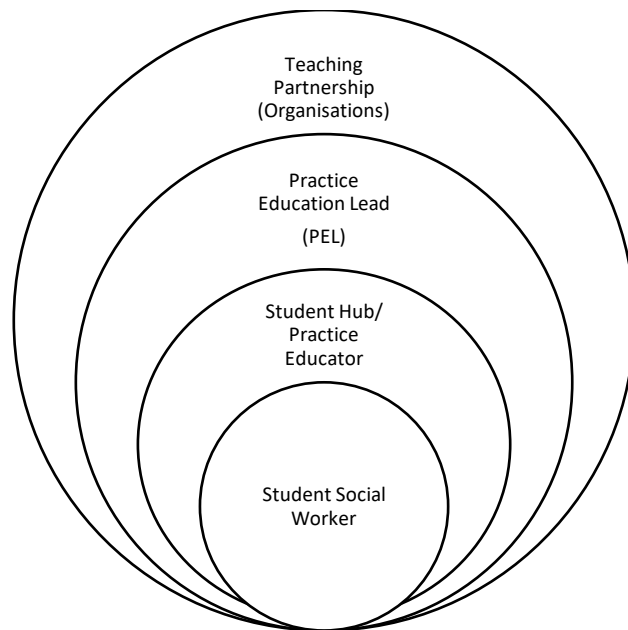


Figure 2: The 4 C's Model of Wellbeing Education

