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# 'Don't do this for Law students!'- embedding disability and wellbeing support within curriculum programmes

## Introduction - defining embedding

When I looked at the dictionary definitions of embedding whilst writing this article I came across two definitions or examples that seem particularly relevant to the topic of embedding disability and wellbeing support within curriculum programmes in Higher Education (HE):

'fix (an object) firmly and deeply in a surrounding mass' and 'attach (a journalist) to a military unit during a conflict' (Google dictionary).

The first is relevant because the aim of embedding this kind of learning in curriculum areas is to place support for students at the heart of the university, to make it part of the body of the institution – the teaching and learning, rather than mental wellbeing or disability support being an option, an adjunct to the main business of students and academics. But as a disability officer carrying out this work I sometimes feel like the journalist attached to the military unit in a war zone – I am part, but not part, of the course team; I may be tolerated, welcomed, or side-lined when I get in the way, and I can only do my job because others, the academic staff, allow me to do so.

## How do we embed at De Montfort University (DMU)?

At DMU our Course Specific Initiatives (CSI) programme has been running since 2017. Through it we provide talks, lectures, workshops, panel discussions, yoga classes, sports sessions, meditation and online learning for students across the institution as part of their timetabled curriculum programme or through their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). What all of this diverse offer has in common is that it aims to teach students skills, strategies, tools and models that they can use to improve or support their own wellbeing. We aim to make this kind of learning accessible to every student, and relevant to every student. We do this by working with course teams and removing the need for anyone taking part to identify (even to themselves) as 'disabled' or having 'mental health issues'.

This approach to support doesn't replace our individually focused support services; it provides an additional option. Like, I imagine, most universities, at DMU we know that many people that could benefit from mental health or disability support never access our services, never even disclose that they have a health condition or impairment or learning difference that impacts their learning. Many others only approach us at a point of crisis – their parent rings us to say they're in hospital with a sickle cell crisis; their personal tutor sends them to see us because they've missed lectures and deadlines due to their mental health; or they are appealing an academic decision. By providing support within taught programmes we hope to encourage students to seek more support if they need it; learn how to tackle the demands of academic study such as managing workload or giving a presentation or working effectively in groups of other students; and reduce the need for individual support where that's appropriate.

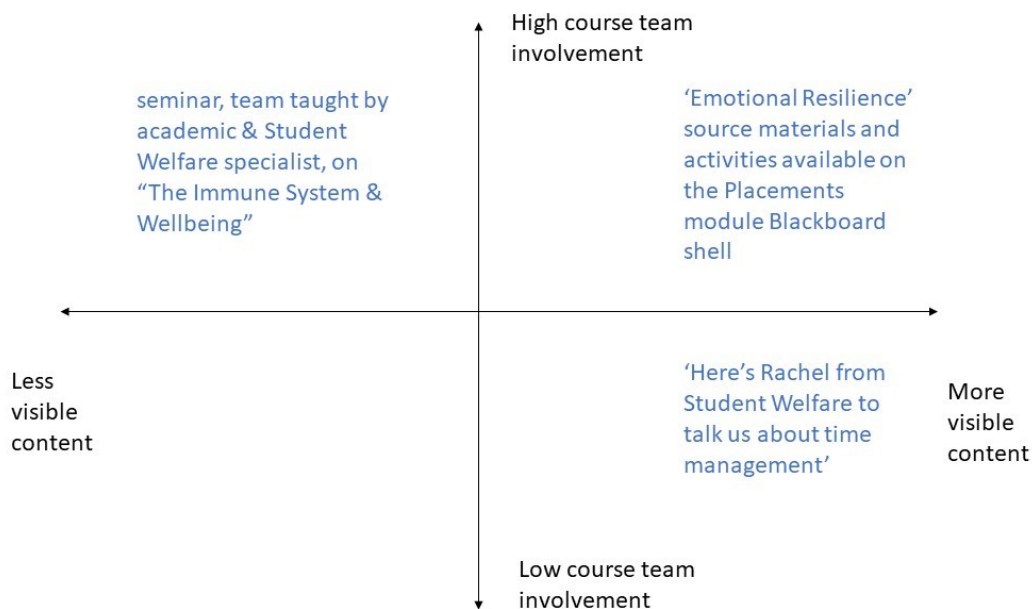
I first worked in the area of embedding back in the early 2000s where the United Kingdom (UK) government encouraged the embedding of adult literacy, language and numeracy learning and support within adult learning more generally (Casey, 2016). As a literacy teacher and trainer I taught literacy and numeracy skills in bricklaying

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workshops, beauty salons and floristry classes. The models of delivery, and the challenges we faced, are exactly the same as we face today when using an embedded approach to provide disability and wellbeing support within HE (Houghton & Anderson, 2017). In this article, I'd like to talk about the approaches to embedding support that we use at DMU and some of the lessons we've learned.

## Approaches to embedding

Whenever you want to embed one kind of learning in another, broader programme, you need to make decisions about how it will be embedded. In HE, will the embedded content be delivered by the academic staff, by disability or mental health specialists, or by a combination of these? And how 'hidden' will the embedded learning be? Will 'Rachel from Student Welfare' be 'coming in to give us a talk' or will the students have no idea that Student Welfare are in any way involved? The approach taken will be dictated by the context and the topic or type of support being embedded. The diagram below shows some of the approaches we've used at DMU and how they fit onto an embedding continuum:



## Lesson learned no 1: Building good relationships with academic colleagues is essential

One quadrant of the diagram is left blank for a good reason. We haven't yet found a way to make what we do less visible to students without the active engagement of our academic colleagues. After all, they know the course material, they know what kinds of issues the students raise with them, and they know how wellbeing fits within all of that. At best, disability officers and mental health specialists can make an educated guess, based on our experience of supporting students and the activities or points in their academic careers when we'd expect students to approach us for support. But an effective working relationship with academic colleagues has many benefits, beyond developing material and approaches that are relevant to a specific cohort of students.

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From my academic colleagues I have gained knowledge about topics like the professional body code of practice in Speech & Language Therapy; the role of an audiologist; and project management techniques used in computer games programming studios. I hope that one day all of that will be really useful in a pub quiz! In the meantime, it means I can give better advice to staff and students about what might and might not be a reasonable adjustment, and how students' disabilities may be accommodated in work placements. My colleagues and I can be better disability officers because we understand more about the courses and future professions of our students.

## Lesson learned no 2: Get to grips with teaching & learning technology

As disability officers and mental health specialists, we are familiar with assistive technology and how it can be used by our students to access teaching and learning. What we may be less experienced with is the teaching and learning technology that is used more widely in our institutions. At DMU we use lecture capture (Panopto) and a Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard) but individual academic departments use additional tools or are teaching their students to use the kinds of technology common to a specific industry. If we are going to teach students within their course programmes then we need to be competent users of this technology. Professional services staff may not routinely be included in training around the technology of teaching and learning and so staff development is essential for running embedded programmes. Students also engage in our sessions when technology is used well; one of the most consistent pieces of feedback that we get from students is that they enjoy the use of Mentimeter (an online polling tool) because they can participate in a learning activity without having to speak up publicly.

## Lesson learned no 3: Staff need time and support to use this approach

At DMU my colleagues in Student Welfare come from a wide variety of professional backgrounds. Some have been teachers, trainers, and group facilitators – but that's not true of everyone. Confidence levels about delivering embedded teaching vary enormously, and with good reason; my own background is in teaching and training, but when faced with giving a lecture on time management to 250 accounting students in a tiered lecture theatre it pushed me far out of my comfort zone.

Staff who deliver embedded teaching may need support, mentoring and training to enable them to work in this way with confidence.

At DMU we also provide detailed workshop notes for every teaching session we offer so that, whichever member of the team is working with a course, they have minimal preparation – they can pick up a pack of materials and go. Making life as easy as possible in this respect has been useful in encouraging my colleagues to embrace an embedded approach because we have minimised the time they need to take away from their individual student focused work.

Time is also needed for academic staff to engage with Student Welfare colleagues to develop embedded approaches. When academic workloads are already a source of pressure, asking academic colleagues to meet with you to co-create a workshop is a significant request. However, the pay-off is potentially worth that investment of time. At DMU my academic colleagues have commented on what they see as reduced stress levels in students taking an assessment; students taking more pro-active approaches to problem solving on placement, and a sense among the course team and students alike that they are "supported" by the university.

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## Lesson learned no 4: 'Don't do this for Law students'

Not literally, of course! This is a quote from the notes for staff in one of our packs of materials. We use some materials or activities with groups across the academic spectrum, but as a team we like to provide ourselves with alternatives, and intelligence about what is likely to be successful with different cohorts. So 'Don't do this for Law students' is about a group discussion activity that we tried out in the Law department – and it wasn't successful, although it worked well elsewhere. Our Law students, we discovered, preferred alternative ways of engaging with the session. With embedding, adapting what you do for the group or context that you're working with is crucial to making it work and students don't hesitate to express their dissatisfaction if they feel they're getting a generic set of 'tips' that don't reflect their reality.

## Lesson learned no 5: It's quite hard to get evidence that embedding works...

One of the difficulties about embedded approaches, because they are so bespoke, is that it can be difficult to measure their impact. That's an issue we face at DMU and is faced more widely around all sorts of embedded provision. Whilst it is relatively easy to obtain student evaluations of a particular initiative, understanding the impact on student behaviour and wellbeing after the session is more difficult to do, not least because there are many sources of information, advice and learning on the topics we teach – within the university and outside. If a student improves their time management, and they've attended a time management workshop, that doesn't necessarily imply that the improvement is due to what they learned there.

In England, [Advance HE](#) is currently working with universities to understand more about this topic. Without good quality evidence to support the practice of embedding, institutions are less likely to prioritise the staff time and resources that the approach requires.

## The future of embedding at DMU

Currently, the Student Welfare team at DMU remains committed to using this approach. We see it as part of our Universal Design for Learning policy because embedded provision provides alternative means of engagement for students in disability and wellbeing support. It also helps us to address the growing numbers of students requiring our services and forms part of our whole organisation approach to student wellbeing, Healthy DMU. We continue to expand the courses we work with, and the range of ways that we work with them – including a switch to online delivery during the Covid 19 lockdown period. We'd love to hear from other universities about their work to embed support, to exchange ideas and share what works. For more about our work at DMU, and to start the conversation, please take a look at the padlet we've prepared: <https://padlet.com/DMUdisability/AHEAD2020> or email me on [rachel.davies@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:rachel.davies@dmu.ac.uk).

## References

Casey, H. (2006) [You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to teach plastering...: embedding literacy, language and numeracy in post-16 vocational programmes: the impact on learning and achievement](#): November 2006. NRDC: London

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