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43.2 Enabling Students' Wellbeing in Distance Design Education

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Abstract

Understanding changes to student wellbeing on design modules in a distance higher education setting is difficult. Previous research suggested that environmental, study and skills-related barriers impact the wellbeing of learners at a distance. This study sought to understand the experiences of barriers and what enabled distance design students' wellbeing. It identifies avenues to balance tensions between conflicting experiences of studying design and maintaining wellbeing that our participants disclosed in a longitudinal, qualitative study using repeat interviews, experience sampling and a diary study. The findings provide insights from the learners' perspectives. Students reported strategies on how to deal with open-ended design projects and how to cope with feedback. They revealed how they currently seek and receive support for design work and wellbeing. We uncovered how learners keep to deadlines and how they approach social learning. The study also exposed enabling study rhythms to facilitate creative flow and how creative environments are set up in the learners' homes. Our findings suggest that educators and designers of hybrid and distance design education should pay attention to three key aspects: dealing with uncertainty, learning satisficing and managing creative flow, to enable design students' wellbeing.

Keywords

distance design learning, higher education, mental health, wellbeing

Background

Wellbeing is a key concept in mental health. It describes a broader dimension of mental health (Houghton & Anderson 2017). Every individual can have or achieve a level of wellbeing, including those identified with a mental health condition (i.e., medically diagnosed). A widely adopted definition of mental health is:

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a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. (WHO 2013, 1)

An individual's wellbeing can change over time, and research on wellbeing of distance learning advocates for taking a social perspective of mental health that 'holds society accountable for change' (Lister 2022, 13). Lister argues that the design and delivery of distance learning (including materials, assessment, student support) could enable or create barriers to wellbeing for distance learners. The shift in responsibility to changing the systems rather than making change as the individual's sole responsibility is significant for the conception of mental health because it introduces the perspective that educators and institutions can actively support students' wellbeing.

Research suggests that assessment is a key threat to student wellbeing: "high-stakes assessment practices particularly threatened wellbeing by heightening consciousness and anxiety of failure." (Jones *et al.* 2021, 441) Design assignments can be considered high stakes as an assignment tends to be project- and problem-based. The entire design process, regardless of what is assessed at the end, takes up a large part of a course, and it involves the individual deeply (McClean *et al.* 2019). Design projects are often ill-defined and become more complex at higher levels of study. Related research on mental health in Architecture education (although not in a distance setting) revealed that:

... students will incur stress at various times throughout the design process, the perceived levels of student stress progressively increased and shifted during the research, exploration, refinement, and finalization design phases of project solution (Gomez-Lanier 2018, 46)

Heightened uncertainty and stress offer additional challenges to learners with impaired mental health. Kendall (2016) highlights that a student with a disability may face additional barriers around assessment in higher education. Distance design education attracts a large cohort of students who declare a mental health condition (between 8 and 10 per cent on a level one module at a UK University, in the UK). With a population of students between 500 and 1000 this makes 50 to 100 students per module, and there is a much larger hidden figure of those who do not declare or are unaware. Less than half of those who register pass their first module.

Lister (2022) developed a taxonomy that offers a systemic perspective of barriers and enablers to participation and success, wellbeing in distance learning that deemphasises the dominant personal deficit perspective. The taxonomy covers three main themes (1) study-related issues, including assessment, tuition, (2) skills-related issues such as self-management or social skills and (3) environmental issues, for example, people and places. These themes and its 11 sub-categories structured our interview instrument and the findings sections of this article.

Research questions

1. What barriers and enablers do distance design students with a declared mental health condition experience throughout their study?

2. How do students currently balance tensions that arise through these barriers to enable wellbeing during study?

Methodology

We chose an experiential, qualitative and longitudinal methodological approach to understand the learners' changing experiences over time. We focused on learners who declared poor mental health and those currently studying a design module at levels one to three. The mixed method study included repeat interviews and experience samples and a diary study over a period of approximately 4 months.

Setting

The study was conducted at a UK University where students study nearly exclusively at a distance. The Institution offers a degree in Design and Innovation combining three core 60-point design modules with other subjects across different pathways. The modules contain self-directed learning materials in print, audio-visual or online formats. Students use a virtual learning environment to access materials, assessment briefs, online tutorials, a forum and virtual studio spaces (where images of designs are shared and commented on). Tutorials allow learners to discuss and contextualise the materials within a tutor group of around 20 students facilitated by a personal tutor. The tutor marks the students' assignments, which are submitted online usually in a word-processing document. Interactions with tutors and peers are mostly voluntary (i.e., not built into the assessment) but encouraged throughout the study. Further information on the open distance learning model can be found in Cross & Holden (2020).

Participant sampling

Ethics approvals were gained before we contacted our participants. We followed the University's Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants.

A purposeful sample of eight students was selected (seven completed the study) from students who declared poor mental health on levels one, two and three in the academic year 2020/2021. Sampling was informed by the examination of 44 student records provided as available participants. We considered students with Anxiety, Depression, Bipolar and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorders (OCDs) and Schizophrenia. Sampling aimed for a maximum of diversity of types of poor mental health and a spread of age, gender, ethnicity and level of attainment in previous modules (Table 1).

Four interviewers worked with two students each. The interviewers were not tutors to the participating students. Interviewers received training in interviewing and mental health impairments and how to respond to potential scenarios.

Methods

Repeat interviews

The interview questions aligned to Lister's taxonomy of enablers and barriers to wellbeing in distance learning (Lister 2022). The interviews focused on the intersecting factors of discipline (knowledge and skills, coursework, assessment), personal circumstances (work and family, environments, life events) and support received during their studies from university and elsewhere. We interviewed six

TABLE 1 Overview of participants' characteristics, names are pseudonyms

Participant	Level of study	Ethnicity	Gender	Age range	Mental health declaration
Anna	3	White	Female	20–30	Bipolar, Anxiety
X	3	Mixed	Female	30–40	[dropped out]
Harry	2	White	Male	20–30	Depression, OCD, Anxiety
Isobel	2	Asian	Female	20–30	Personality, Anxiety, Depression
Charlotte	1	Unknown	Female	20–30	Eating, Anxiety, Low mood
Ben	1	Unknown	Male	30–40	PTSD, OCD, Anxiety
Jake	1	White	Male	40–50	Depression
Zoe	1	White	Female	20–30	Anxiety

students twice, towards the beginning and end of their modules' study. One student dropped out of the study before the second interview. The interviews took place on the computer using a video meeting software of their choice and were audio recorded. The first interview focused on getting to know the person and their approaches to study and how they dealt with mental health challenges in general. The second interview focused more on challenging or positive experiences during the study and any support received during the study.

Experience sampling and diary study

We conducted the experience sample and a diary study to understand the participants, feelings, thoughts, behaviours and environmental factors influencing their study experience at that moment and over a short period of time (Myin-Germeys *et al.* 2018). Three times a day over a week during their study, we gathered the responses to 4 short questions sent as text messages to their smartphones regarding their experience in the moment and a more reflective set of questions at the end of the day. The subsequent diary study asked participants to record their feelings, thoughts and behaviours while completing a part of a project assignment in a format of their choice (e.g., video, audio, text, annotated drawings or a mix thereof).

At the end of each experience sampling and diary recording period, the interviewer and participants engaged in a debrief conversation based on their responses. As the study progressed the engagement with the participants became increasingly dialogical. We held frequent interviewer team meetings to keep aligned with our methodology. Debriefs for interviewers and interviewees gave an opportunity for further reflection and to validate the data we had gathered.

Data collection

All data collection took place at a distance using a computer and a smartphone. We tried to accommodate the individual preferences as much as possible. We asked whether there were trigger words or phrases or painful memories or topics to avoid. Some preferred to have video on or off, others preferred to walk while talking on the phone. We offered to split interview sessions and participants could

withdraw at any time without giving notice or reason, which one participant did. However, we offered the participants ample opportunity to let us know if they wanted any support with whatever prompted the withdrawal. Since we had asked for an emergency contact number from the student we could have followed up if any issue for safeguarding was suspected.

Overall, 10 hours of audio and video recordings were transcribed and anonymised into approx. 100 pages of textual and image data.

Data analysis

All anonymised transcripts were loaded into NVivo for thematic analysis. Student experiences were initially coded inductively in the language the participants were using 'in vivo'. After the initial coding of about half of the data, we combined and condensed nodes as well as after all the data was coded. This produced a list of 193 nodes. During the coding process, we noticed that some students reported enablers during the study that other participants experienced as barriers. This is consistent with Lister's work, which identified the same themes as barriers and enablers (Lister 2022).

We decided to focus on how barriers are resolved and enable student wellbeing in the subsequent analysis of the data. Jones *et al.* (2021) have used the conceptual metaphor of 'tensions' between conflicting requirements in the design and delivery of learning. Tensions can either create barriers or they can be resolved and enabled. Tension drafts were written in parallel to the thematic coding in NVivo. We used code co-occurrence, how often a node was coded together with another node, and the tension drafts as a rough guide to sort nodes into thematic clusters.

For example, several tensions emerged around *Assessment*. This theme was coded 271 times (our highest code occurrence). The highest co-occurrence with *Assessment* was *Doubt and uncertainty and Design evaluation, Being anxious*. At the same time, *Assessment* was coded together with *Being engaged in the study topic* and *Enjoyment*. Looking at tension drafts, we identified one tension between the appreciation of openness of creative project assignments and a fear of misinterpretation of the assignment and its feedback. The draft suggested that self-doubt whether they were on the right path led students to become apathic, procrastinate or to become compulsive and anxious. Students did not know when to stop designing when they engaged in open-ended project assignments. They enjoyed the assignments but were also anxious about their achievements. Examining the nodes (and underlying data) in thematic clusters helped to refine the tension narratives, which are presented in this article's findings section.

Findings

The tensions are divided into study, skills and environment-related following Lister's thematic areas.

Study-related tensions

Openness of design project assignments and the fear of misinterpretation

Barriers experienced

Design project assignments are kept slightly ambiguous to allow for a variety of creative responses. The assignments aim at increasing learners' cognitive flexibility

and adaptive thinking. Students agreed that projects are a good challenge if they are in the right space of mind. However, this openness causes uncertainty in students. Learners' wellbeing decreases because they do not know if they are doing it right and become anxious:

Someone with an anxiety, you kind of – well I do at least – I go over everything that it could be in my head, so I might ask things that might seem obvious, but in my mind, I've come up with twenty scenarios that it could be.
(Charlotte)

The unboundedness of a project brief necessitates the interpretation of said brief. This also applies to the feedback given on project work. Learners overanalyse written project brief requirements as well as tutors or peers' feedback. The fear of getting it wrong leads to increased self-doubt and worsening mental wellbeing, apathy or obsessive and compulsive behaviours. Students start to over- or under-work. They self-identify as being '*your own worst crit*', or the '*brief cannot possibly be so simple*' or that a '*prior good assignment mark cannot possibly have been justified*'.

Resolutions that enabled

Project uncertainty is managed by keeping to a planned schedule for the course work. Planning for assignments enables learners to control or to deal with uncertainty proactively and preventatively. They study ahead; they build in time to check out multiple sources or examples and opinions to create more certainty. Students resolved uncertainty by reading the assignment feedback repeatedly and seeking additional clarification, although there were tensions who they asked for clarification (see '*Delayed but more valuable tutor feedback*').

Another way to control the openness of the brief and its interpretations is to develop a passion for the topic. When students develop a sense of ownership, they may shift their perspective of success from doing what is asked to doing the assignment in a way they feel adds value. This also includes feeling enabled to reflect on their own past to motivate others:

I did enjoy assignment 1. ... So, my whole picture was to do with depression, anxiety, ... the whole picture was negativity past, and present and kind of being stamped out by positivity on top of it, it is hard to explain. (Jake)

While learners with poor mental health tend to be more isolated from peers, many co-designed with those who are close to them at home or work to help frame, develop or evaluate the ideas and develop skills to reduce uncertainty.

Delayed but more valuable tutor feedback and immediacy of others' feedback

Barriers experienced

Misunderstandings can arise from using unfamiliar technical terms in written communication with a tutor. Students would not question their tutor further as they fear to damage the tutor student relationship. Other reasons not to seek clarification from the tutor were the experience of delays in feedback from their tutor which creates anxieties exemplified by Charlotte: "*... it ended it up being days where I couldn't do anything, and I was just waiting for a reply.*"

Only tutor feedback carries the level of expertise and reassurance that students are on the right track. Not least because tutors are also the markers of assignments.

Family and friends are more readily or timely available but might not be critical enough because they have not got the disciplinary knowledge to draw on:

I would say I get a lot of support from my wife, ... I will always read my TMAs to her and ask her if they make sense, like she might not necessarily understand the kind of technicalities. (Anna)

Resolutions that enabled

Activation, that is doing another useful activity while waiting for their tutor to reply, was a common resolution to this tension. It shifted a potential vicious cycle of worrying to doing something useful. Assignments that can be broken down into smaller tasks and are non-dependent on other tasks were hence seen as more enabling. The times students waited for tutor feedback were also used for self-care breaks, but this only resolved the tension if students were ahead and not close to a deadline (see 'Working towards deadlines').

While a written response from the tutor within a day was appreciated by all students, some valued telephone appointments where *"my tutor explained things to me in a way that I could understand and just at the same time reassuring me that what I'm doing is right."* (Anna)

Small peer study groups provided similarly instant feedback on assignment tasks that provided some level of reassurance: *"... the WhatsApp group is cool because you can post in there and it is like instant."* (Ben)

Seeking advice from multiple sources, such as from the counsellor, parents or partner was also common. Although it resolves the tension in favour of speedy over expertly advice.

Support for wellbeing and on design project work

Barriers experienced

Wellbeing is a spectrum and students experience changes in their mental health during their study. A decline of physical health has a profound impact on their mental health and vice versa. For some students starting learning again can cause changes in routines which can be disruptive. Others may receive their diagnosis alongside study, which distorts their perception of and communication about what kind of help they need or seek. A tension develops when students receive mental health counselling but seek design project specific advice.

Many students with impaired mental health meet a counsellor on regular basis, in fact more often than their tutor. The therapists are then often asked to help with the challenges that are caused by design project work, including how to make design decisions under the pressures of a deadline and what to prioritise in project management. Counsellors tend to give preventative advice helping to develop good habits but may not help in the moment:

I felt the advice she [counsellor] gave on the actual Uni side ... doesn't necessarily help day to day like I'm stuck with this now and I need help to kind of change. (Charlotte)

Resolutions that enabled

The declaration of mental health challenges to the university was seen as an enabler. This triggered additional tutor communication that was more geared towards design, which was seen supportive.

My tutor put some time aside for me and we did have a sort of one on one for maybe 45 minutes/1 hour – and I didn't ask for it, it was the tutors' suggestion and that was quite nice because I was new to Uni and maybe wanted to ask, if that makes sense! (Harry)

While most counsellors helped with preventing poor wellbeing, some proactively worked with the student by breaking down tasks and provided critical reading and feedback on assignment drafts.

So I spoke to my counsellor and sort of said to her, I'm having a bit of a bad time and I don't know what to do and how to progress from here, and she said OK let's make a bit of a plan – so the strategy that we came up with was to strip all the way back and start small and simple, ... then devise plans to deal with the smaller things and then tackle the bigger problem! (Ben)

A balance needs to be gained between preventative and practical support working together in timely manner to enable student wellbeing. For example, practical support is not processed if a student is unable to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour causing episodes of anxiety or depression. First the triggers that caused the dysregulation and stress levels must be reduced before practical advice can be taken on. To achieve this, students employed other coping mechanisms, such as taking a walk, listening to music, playing a game or having a chat with friends and family that turned out to be inspirational for creative project work as well.

Skills-related tensions

Working towards deadlines and adjusting study rhythms

Barriers experienced

Coping mechanisms give the student control, but they can quickly become disruptive when students are spending longer on an activity than they should, and a deadline is approaching. Suddenly a coping mechanism is seen as a barrier: *"I do feel a little overwhelmed and leading to a level of anxiety due to the pressure I tend to create myself for upcoming deadlines."* (Harry)

In design project work, something like an idea not working the way it was anticipated can cause an episode of poor mental health. Unforeseen events such as the loss of work due to IT issues can also add to the sense of loss of control, causing anxiety or depression especially when a deadline is looming.

I had these basic ideas to start with, we actually just did the game. It just didn't work. And so, I started getting anxious cos I've only got a couple of weeks to do this ... I had such a rough mental health for like 5 days, I just couldn't get up because I felt so stressed. (Ben)

Resolutions that enabled

Flexibility in distance learning enabled students to keep studying without the fear of losing out because of missing a lecture or not coming to the studio. Most learners work with two alternating rhythms, one of extreme regularity and predictability and another of intensive periods of short but irregular study bursts. During days with a regular routine, students keep to hourly rhythms intersecting self-care,

chores and studying. This opens the opportunity to follow a creative flow if it occurs (see 'Following the flow'), or sit out an anxious or low mood phase, and take time off if they need to, to care for themselves:

I need a routine but at the same time I need a couple of days a week off that routine just to change things up a bit, obviously otherwise it just becomes a bit mundane! (Charlotte)

Students know precisely that overworking has negative impact on their well-being, but they plan for a break after the burst. Students use the indication of time a task should take given in the module materials to set a time limit to the study burst and to keep to the deadlines. They also use their family and partners to monitor that a burst doesn't extend for too long by sharing assessment deadlines and module workload.

Independence and social learning

Barriers experienced

Students with a long-term condition accept that they may need to temporarily interrupt their studies rather than studying on 'bad days', which creates frustrations and adds to their anxiety and stresses. This trade-off was often used to justify not to engage in social learning with peers. Social learning in design relies on learners engaging in similar tasks at the same time often in a shared space. Independent learning is a large part of the motivation to study at a distance. Students are aware of the benefits of social learning, but their disengagement can be motivated by trauma, experiences of bias and discrimination or social anxieties:

I usually prefer lone working but as a result of that preference I'm not so good at interacting with others to improve my ideas. (Harry)

I don't feel confident enough to ask people for their opinion because I'm worried it's not going to fit with what I want, or you know, it is not going to be a good impression. (Zoe)

Students with a declared mental health issue often battle with emotional (dys) regulation and don't want to commit to building social relationships with peers. High-emotional states drain students, which can limit the motivation to complete social learning tasks.

Resolutions that enabled

Independence was seen as enabling as it honed the student's skill of self-criticality and self-evaluation of design ideas: *"I'm quite critical but that does come in handy when you are actually trying to pick out ideas, or like disregard some and keep some."* (Charlotte)

Even though students prefer not to interact directly with others, listening into live or recorded conversations and tutorials, sometimes repeatedly, was seen as an enabler. Recorded tutorials simulate a sense of being with others. Having assignments topics and tasks explained and interpreted by a 'real person', with video on, was important.

The virtual studio could be overwhelming or not timely if students were ahead of the study plan. Although when they were asked to upload images of their work

as part of the assessment, they complied. Following visual media streams on Pinterest or Instagram was seen as valuable.

Social learning within the learners' safe spaces at home, with family or partners was seen as the most appropriate resolution. They preferred to engage face to face, including face to face tutorials, if they had the option and the environment was set up for it (safe space).

Following the flow of creativity and knowing when to stop or move on

Barriers experienced

Balancing wellbeing with achievement in a period of intensive work created tensions. Following a creative flow is satisfying and creates positive emotions, especially when students are ahead in their study not nearing a deadline. The potential negative impacts from breaking study and life routine, include sleep disturbance, a messy desk, or loss of daily self-care routines, such as exercise. This creative overdrive can lead to obsessive loops when students no longer know when to stop designing. Not knowing how far to take an idea builds up anxiety leads to inefficiency and overworking, the feeling of losing control and being behind (see 'Working towards deadlines').

If I'm in the flow of trying to get it all together again I kind of forget where my sources have come from and trying to like add all those in and not break the flow is a bit difficult. (Charlotte)

Creative flow also spills over into everyday life, and rather than focusing on studying and assignments, students go on tangents with their creativity:

Creativity – it feels quite refreshing and very enlightening [...] but it gets to the point that I'm trying to create what I need in the house, or what I need as a person, and what other people need becomes like jumbled up ... and I don't know which one to be focusing in because I'm trying to do the assignment at that time. (Isobel)

Flow also often happens at inconvenient times:

I think, with the OCD, I guess, like obsessive loops. ... Yeah, so it's like a huge flurry and wave of ideas and different things that come to me about something. ... I tend to find it is at inconvenient times as well, like when you're trying to go to bed at night. (Ben)

These obsessive loops and neglect of wellbeing then may lead to creative inhibition and an inability to judge when it is time to stop and move on to another task.

Resolutions that enabled

Students break down assignments into smaller chunks to create a structure for smaller more contained flow sessions to emerge, for example:

I only had to get from A to B and then B to C and then from C to D rather than A-Z! which seemed like a huge jump – so it helped for me to keep that

small as well, it helped – it kept the anxiety low, and I tried not to put too much pressure on myself. (Anna)

Whenever they come across something relevant or produced ideas, students tried to get it out of their heads onto ‘paper’ or another medium, for example, they keep voice memos and, or post its or diaries everywhere in the house:

I’ll be like, in bed trying to sleep at night, and this whole wave of ideas just come So, then it’s like, grabbing the notebook as quickly as possible and trying to draw down as many things to give myself reminders of that stuff as possible. (Ben)

Some students insert any ideas or relevant information in their assignment template, then they sort and edit it regularly. Students’ self-criticality helps to evaluate ideas from flow sessions and use the most promising ideas to progress. While some students are compelled to carrying through an idea to perfection and seeing this as their main achievement (a good grade is a bonus), others realised that ‘you sometimes need to aim for good enough’ (Anna). Students use the recommended study time given in the module materials to assess when to stop and move on. They make use of their friends and family to monitor their progress and wellbeing (see ‘Working towards deadlines’).

Environment-related tensions

Study environments for practical and creative work

Barriers experienced

Small, dark study rooms in the student’s home are often not conducive to creative work. In a low mood phase, students do not want to be alone in a dark study space, as they are not motivated or inspired by what is around them. *“It has been hard enough to get upstairs [small study] to do anything.”* (Jake) Students needed a large, light open space to immerse in a productive mess and see inspirations around them. Students use the dining table in the living room for creative work, but this creates tensions. They cannot spread out or leave the table messy. Needing to be mindful of others, creates barriers in a period of flow when students would prefer to ‘power through’. The shared home environment also offers distractions that are sometimes counterproductive, such as being reminded of chores, or others watching TV. Partners can cause irritation by making the slightest noise that interrupts the flow, especially when a difficult subject is studied.

Resolutions that enabled

Despite drawbacks, many students create their own mini ‘design studio’ in a larger, shared space at home. This offers opportunities for feedback from people they feel comfortable with. Some students first tidy and then curate the desk, making it accessible for this important feedback. They build the ‘curating your desk activity’ into their daily routines before others return. This positive side effect that students had, created chunks of study time to disrupt obsessive loops. Listening to music allows students to avoid unintended disruptions and focus on the task in the home studio. Other students, whose office is large enough, prefer to withdraw in their private working space but they build a routine or rhythm to keep connected with others in the home, such as time for tea, a walk or other shared tasks. Others

developed communication devices (such as a traffic light system) to signal whether they needed interaction or needed to be left alone in their study space.

Discussion and conclusions

The article has presented a series of barriers and enablers experienced by distance design students with a declared mental health condition. It focused on how these students currently balance the tensions they face to enable wellbeing during their study. Many of these tensions might be resolved differently in a traditional design education setting, e.g., through ongoing tutor and peer discussions in the studio. The participants in this study have tried 'traditional' learning settings but failed with a lack of flexibility in these settings. The open-supported learning model of education offers access to education and flexibility during education at scale (Cross & Holden 2020). However, comparing distance to traditional studio design education (e.g., Gogu & Kumar 2021) supports the premise that tutor availability to give frequent formative feedback could possibly be one of the most effective ways to decrease the barriers to progression of learners at a distance not just for those with poor mental health.

The dominant tension in design education of being uncertain about what is required is resolved through social mechanisms in traditional studios. Glăveanu (2022) argues that the creative process of turning not knowing into knowing is fundamental to learning. But he continues that if we do not know for too long, anxieties emerge and learners feel more vulnerable and uncertain. We must acknowledge that the traditional social and face-to-face design education paradigm may not enable learners with a mental health condition. They harbour a strong desire to avoid uncertainty due to emotion dysregulation that can go with it (Zielińska & Karwowski 2022). Because of the social risk or the perceived embarrassment of sharing ideas with their peers or other people, they may prefer to hold back (Erez & Nouri 2010) or only share ideas with the people they trust such as friends and family. The experiences point to the need to create more trust in distance education systems and support structures, not only through timely tutor feedback but also through safer online spaces for peer interaction. As reported by Orr (2021) in a study of female distance learners with depression, careful consideration should be given to increasing peer interactions. Kotera *et al.* (2021) suggested supporting social learning in distance learners with a disability through peer mentoring rather than peer collaboration to ease the learners' fear of further stigmatisation. When other systemic uncertainties are controlled for, learners may focus on creative uncertainty which was argued to bring out originality (Boden 2003) and motivate students rather than creating additional barriers (Zielińska & Karwowski 2022).

Comparing our insights from linking barriers to enablers with Lister's extensive work (Lister 2022), the topic of self-management brought out an interesting contrast. While Lister found self-management much more strongly related to barriers, our findings show them more as enablers. Design projects are frequently open-ended, and there is often no single perfect solution to a problem. Knowing when to stop designing because a satisfactory solution has been developed, also called satisficing (Simon 1956), is a core management and decision-making skill for developing designers. The way design is taught might contribute positively to learning self-management skills.

Without a physical design studio and its embedded rhythms, learning to control rhythms of regularity and irregularity - or creative flow - are key enablers for wellbeing in distance design students. Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow (1990) and later work with Seligman emphasised the 'building of positive qualities' from their own regular routines or from the people around them (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5). The study routines for a distance student are tied to the positive relationships and safe spaces at home. But we also saw that routines embedded in learning materials, in tutorials and assignment feedback, can have a positive effect on student wellbeing.

In summary, dealing with uncertainty, learning satisficing and managing creative flow were the key aspects to consider when educating design learners with a mental health condition and to enable wellbeing at a distance. Finally, our participants in this study have offered numerous ideas of how distance learning environments could be improved, such as additional formative assessment points throughout their study, which we are currently exploring in our curriculum development. Unfortunately, there is no space in this article to discuss them. Future work will focus on working with students and educators as partners to change learning environments to facilitate wellbeing.

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Nicole Lotz, I am a senior lecturer in design at The Open University, UK. I am interested in design processes, collaboration and engagement across boundaries and at the margins. I have published multiple articles in conferences and journals across the disciplines of design, education and international development (see <http://oro.open.ac.uk/view/person/ns4678.html>). My work seeks to offer opportunities for disadvantaged communities to engage and persevere through creative learning, even in challenging situations. My research is heavily influenced by my upbringing in Eastern Germany and my lived experiences in Hong Kong and the UK, and the fieldwork that I carried out in Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Muriel Sippel, I am a post graduate research student and associate lecturer in design at The Open University, UK. I have a passion for creative design thinking, design education, learner mental wellbeing and inclusive practice. I have presented scholarship research outcomes at conferences for inclusive education and student mental wellbeing within distance design education. Throughout my studies and my work, I endeavour to deliver inclusive design practice to enable design learners, including those with mental ill health, to pursue their academic ambitions and bolster their wellbeing. My motivations and inspirations for my research are prompted further by my master's research in primary education, my lived experiences in design secondary education and my background in manufacturing industries in the UK and USA.

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