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COMMENT

Promoting Well-being through History Teaching

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Abstract

This article explores the potential for the greater infusion of well-being concerns into the teaching of history in UK HEIs. Drawing upon results from a survey of over 100 current undergraduates in one UK History department, alongside a scoping study of well-being provision provided by history departments or their equivalent in about ninety UK HEIs, this article considers ways in which well-being can be promoted through the teaching and learning strategies of historians. The article discusses the meaning of the term ‘well-being’ and asks why historians have sometimes been reluctant participants in the ‘eudaemonic turn’. The negativity bias of history as an endeavour, and the potential for understanding the past to enhance or diminish an individual’s sense of well-being is discussed, as is the value of historicising the concept of well-being itself. The case for integrating well-being as a key element in the degree-level study of history is made, and the article concludes by urging all HEI history practitioners to consider the value of curricular infusion and mapping the design and delivery of their modules onto the New Economics Foundation’s ‘five ways to well-being’.

Keywords: well-being; teaching and learning; curricular infusion; happiness

Introduction

There is a widespread recognition of the challenge of mental health and well-being among young people internationally, and facing UK students in particular. The most recent *World Happiness Report*, which draws on evidence from 140 nations, suggests that those aged between 15 and 24 in the UK, Europe, North America and Australia are experiencing declining well-being scores, and that attendance at university is no guarantee of psychological

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well-being.[1] Action to address this problem in UK HEIs has ranged from the creation of a sector-wide University Mental Health Charter, supported by the Office for Students (OfS), through to more local, departmental and disciplinary initiatives to embed well-being within teaching delivery.[2] Historians have participated in these initiatives, at all levels. The museum and heritage sectors have led the way in social prescribing and other well-being programmes, and many colleagues have developed modules and teaching resources that have built upon the obvious potential for historical study to help promote a sense of place, connection and belonging that can form powerful elements in an individual's well-being.[3] Moreover, the recent publication of the edited collection *History and Human Flourishing* (2023), which *Historical Transactions* highlighted in a blog series, represents a further step forward in professional historians reflecting upon how well-being concerns relate directly to our discipline and how our research, teaching and practices might contribute to addressing the challenges facing our students.[4]

In many ways, however, we are still in the early stages of the conversation about history and well-being.[5] In surveying the secondary literature around pedagogy and well-being it is relatively easy to find illustrative examples of attempts to integrate well-being at subject level in a range of disciplines, including anthropology, business studies, communications, computer studies, health, human sciences, law, nursing, philosophy, psychology and theology, but history is noticeably less prominent.[6] This does not mean that historians are unusually insensitive to student well-being; colleagues struggling to assist their personal tutees with pastoral concerns would certainly testify to the contrary. It might, however, suggest a certain hesitancy when it comes to discussing a more systematic integration of well-being concerns into our teaching. This, in turn, perhaps reflects the generally practical – critics would say undertheorised – way in which many historians tend to approach problems and, I would suggest, owes something to a certain scepticism about the whole well-being agenda within the profession.[7]

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[1] J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard., J. D. Sachs., J.-E. De Neve., L. B. Aknin and S. Wang (eds.), *World Happiness Report 2024* (Oxford, 2024). Full text and supporting documentation can be downloaded from the website: worldhappiness.report.

[2] Office for Students, 'Funding boost to support Student Minds' Mental Health Charter', 28 Feb. 2024. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/funding-boost-to-support-student-minds-university-mental-health-charter/.

[3] These include initiatives aimed at students, such as the University of Edinburgh Museum's *Prescribe Culture* scheme. See https://www.ed.ac.uk/students/health-wellbeing/social-prescribeed/prescribe-culture.

[4] D. M. McMahon (ed.), *History and Human Flourishing* (Oxford, 2023). For the supporting blogs see https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2023/06/28/history-and-human-flourishing/.

[5] Many of the most interesting contributions have come from those with a literature, rather than a straight history, background. See R. Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2014); T. Lutz, *Crying: A Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York, 2001); A. Potkay, *Hope: A Literary History* (Cambridge, 2022).

[6] See T. A. Olson, T. A. and J. B. Riley, 'Weaving the Campus Safety Net by Integrating Student Health Issues into the Curriculum', *About Campus*, 14 (2009), 27–9.

In what follows, I want to address some of the doubts and questions about well-being, as a way of opening-up a broader conversation about promoting well-being through history teaching at university. Hitherto, the evidence from our scoping study suggests, where a well-being agenda has been consciously pursued within history departments, it has been on an ad hoc, unsystematic, individual basis. My argument is that well-being is too important to be left to the chance interests of particular members of staff; an approach which, in any case, runs the risk of producing unhealthy, dependence relationships in which students fixate on particular modules or teachers. Instead, well-being needs to become integral to the way in which we *all* teach our modules. If this article encourages readers to reflect upon their own practices and share their experiences, so that others might benefit from them, then it will have fulfilled its task.

Method and structure

As part of a Royal Historical Society Jinty Nelson Fellowship exploring how a well-being agenda might enrich history teaching, I undertook a survey of just over 100 current undergraduate students, enrolled on the History BA and related joint degree programmes at the University of Reading, and a scoping study of well-being practices in about ninety UK HEI history departments (or their equivalent).

The survey, which was conducted anonymously and online, asked fifteen questions, with a mixture of set and open text answers. The areas covered included: a well-being self-assessment (on a scale of 1 to 10); a ranking of concerns and areas in which students felt they needed help; awareness of departmental and central university support systems; and student views on the potential for a well-being module as part of a history degree programme. The participants were all full-time students, overwhelmingly aged 18–21 years old, and made up of first year (43), second year (39) and third year (21) undergraduates.[8]

The scoping study looked at the websites of about ninety UK HEIs which offer history degrees. It sought to establish a main point of contact, with responsibility for the well-being of history students, and evidence of well-being concerns and initiatives, on both the history pages and the university website. Once identified, each point of contact was asked to provide further details, and any reflections they wished to share. Representatives from eleven institutions responded.

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[7] According to James Banner, 'the entire discipline of history is undertheorized in comparison with many of its kindred disciplines in the humanities and social science'. J. M. Banner, *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History* (New Haven, NJ, 2021), 240.

[8] Without making any unwarranted claims to be representative of history undergraduates nationally, there are no reasons for assuming that results drawn from Reading will be wildly out of line with what we might expect elsewhere. History at Reading occupies a mid-table position on most tabulated rankings; makes a BBB A-level offer; and scored 93.1% (national average 91.1%) for the theme one, 'Teaching on my Course' section of the 2023 NSS.

In writing this article, insights from the survey, scoping study and further information provided have been combined with a review of the broader well-being literature, to help to answer the following questions:

- What is well-being?
- Does history teach and promote well-being?
- Should history promote well-being?
- How can historians teach with well-being?

The article concludes by making the case for historians to embrace an agenda which can simultaneously enrich our teaching and benefit our students.

What is well-being?

The term well-being, and the idea that it might form a key component in education, is not new. Jeremy Bentham in his *Chrestomathia* (1816) could not have been more direct: ‘The proper end of education is no other than the proper end of life – wellbeing.’[9] But although the term is well established its meaning is notoriously unclear. As one recent review put it: ‘a clear and useful definition and conceptualisation of well-being remains elusive.’[10] Almost every published article and piece of research on well-being begins by acknowledging that it remains ‘a nebulous term’ and goes on to discuss its contested meaning. This is a serious problem for anyone interested in integrating a theoretically valid concept of well-being into their work. As a recent exploration of the use of the term by doctors observes: ‘In the absence of an agreed definition, many synonyms, descriptions, lists of well-being components or determinants, are used interchangeably when well-being is discussed, making it hard to compare well-being research studies.’[11] How then, one might reasonably ask, can we discuss well-being, let alone pursue it in an educational context, if we cannot agree on what it means?

One answer, I would suggest, lies in acknowledging that well-being is not – and can never be – a fixed, eternal, objective entity; it must instead be understood as a set of context-specific qualities. ‘The research literature suggests significant differences in conceptualisations of wellbeing across different cultures, ages, and population groups’, and rather than ignore this or attempt to smooth down distinctions, our starting point must be an acknowledgement that we are concerned with a specific group and with enhancing specific (educationally favourable) aspects of their well-being.[12] As historians we are not seeking to promote well-being per se – as a societal wide, let alone an ahistorical, entity – but the well-being of history students *as history students* in UK HEIs in the third decade of the twenty-first century. If we return to the 'what is well-being?' question with this in mind, we can begin to build a workable definition.

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[9] J. Bentham, *Chrestomathia: being a collection of papers, explanatory of the design of an institution, proposed to be set on foot under the name of the chrestomathic school for the extension of the news system of instruction to the higher branches of learning, for the use of the meddling and higher ranks in life* (1816), 606.

See, also D. Collard. ‘Research on Wellbeing: Some Advice from Jeremy Bentham’, *WeD Working Paper 02*, ESRC April 2003.

[10] A. Jarden and A. Roache, ‘What is Wellbeing?’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20 (2023), 5006.

[11] G. Simons and D. S. Baldwin, ‘A Critical Review of the Definition of ‘Wellbeing’ for Doctors and their Patients in a Post Covid-19 Era’, *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 67 (2021), 984–91.

Well-being from this perspective is immediately understood as something richer than a noun indicating a state of being comfortable, healthy or happy. Most of those working on the concept emphasise that beyond immediate happiness, well-being encompasses ideas of fulfilment, purpose and control in one's life.[13] This multidimensional definition is rooted in Abram Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and was given its current form by the positive psychology movement, which is said to have begun with Martin Seligman's 1998 presidency of the American Psychological Association, and has inspired initiatives such as the *World Happiness Report* (2012).[14] Positive psychology has been defined as 'the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing on multiple levels', in which the strengthening of positive character traits is encouraged.[15] The underlying idea can be traced back to the Aristotelian concept of *eudaemonia*, but its proximate roots lie in a later twentieth century reaction against psychological approaches, particularly Freudianism, which focused on dysfunction. In broad terms, positive psychology sought to reorientate the discipline so that it foregrounded positive emotions and the development of talents.[16]

As well as defining well-being, we also need to consider how it is measured. For the past forty years, the main method employed has been the Subjective Well-Being (SWB) model, pioneered by Ed Diener.[17] SWB surveys provide the core underlying material for all major well-being studies, including the annual *World Happiness Report*, the OECD's *How's Life?* survey, and the UK Office for National Statistics' *Measures of National Well-being*. Diener's SWB model includes both affective and cognitive components, asking participants to evaluate Positive Affects (PA), Negative Affects (NA) and an integrated, global Life Satisfaction (LS) score. The LS score, which is essentially cognitive, is usually measured by asking respondents to rate their overall satisfaction with life

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[12] Jarden and Roache, 'What is Wellbeing?', 5006.

[13] See R. P. Dodge *et al*., 'The Challenge of Defining Wellbeing', *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2 (2012), 222–35.

[14] A. H. Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation', *Psychological Review*, 50 (1943), 370–96.

For an uncritical and wholly sympathetic summary of Seligman's career see his page on his Positive Psychology Center site: https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/people/martin-ep-seligman.

[15] M.E.P. Seligman and M. Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive Psychology: An Introduction', *American Psychologist*, 55 (2000), 5–14.

[16] The practice of positive psychology by Dr Laurie Santos (Yale) and others, especially on her 'The Science of Well-being' course, has encompassed a fuller spectrum of emotions, including sadness. See https://www.drlauriesantos.com/science-well-being.

[17] E. Diener, 'Subjective Well-being', *Psychological Bulletin*, 95 (1984), 542–75.

Table 1. Seligman's five components of Wellbeing Theory

P	Positive Emotions	Satisfaction, awe, contentment
E	Engagement	The opportunity for 'flow'
R	Relationships	Quality and quantity of social connections in and out of group
M	Meaning	Sense of purpose
A	Accomplishment	Achievement and progression

on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied) with a question such as: 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days.'[18]

It perhaps needs to be emphasised, especially for those of us primed in positivism, that self-evaluation is a valid methodology. For immediate assessments a subjective judgement can be more meaningful than an observed one: 'I am enjoying myself' is a more reliable statement than 'You are enjoying yourself'. The balance perhaps shifts with a greater range of evidence and a longer-term perspective – 'My life is good' and 'Your life is good' might both be valid – but the idea that well-being can be ascertained without a subjective element is doubtful. Moreover, although measurement of LS is inherently individual and subjective, the frameworks in which LS is experienced are social and constructed. LS scores themselves are the endpoint, a balancing of Positive and Negative Affects, and a representation of the extent to which PA outweighs NA. The key to enhancing them, therefore, and what must sit at the heart of a definition of well-being with which historians designing curricula can engage, is the extent to which a history degree allows and encourages students to develop, thrive and flourish.

Well-being in an educational setting, that is, is eudaemonic rather than hedonistic. It is concerned with the extent to which development and fulfilment can be achieved through challenging tasks and meaningful activities associated with positive moods and elevated PA. To what extent do our degree programmes provide this? Do they enhance or detract from well-being defined in this way? Do our students enjoy opportunities for fulfilment, purpose, and control?

One way to think about this might be to consider the checklist of PERMA characteristics developed by Seligman (see Table 1).[19]

Do our programmes and modules promote these five characteristics? Do we induce Positive Emotions and provide opportunities for Engagement? Does a history degree foster Relationships and provide our students with Meaning? Are we certain that we impart a sense of Accomplishment? The evidence from our student survey, in which over half of those who responded said that they struggled with 'Motivation' would suggest that we might do more to promote PERMA among our undergraduates.

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[18] Slightly different wording is employed in different countries. See *OECD Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being* (2013).

[19] See M. Seligman, *Flourish: A New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being and how to achieve Them* (2017).

Does history teach and promote well-being?

History is not a happy subject. Whether or not we accept Suzanne Marchand's judgement that the discipline took a wrong turn with Thucydides, it is certainly true that the birth of its modern incarnation came with dire tidings.[20] For Gibbon, history – by which he meant the recorded past, rather than the past in totality – was 'little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind'.[21] Hegel was, if anything, even less jolly: 'The History of the World is not the theatre of happiness,' he wrote, 'Periods of happiness are blank pages in it.'[22] The discipline, of course, has expanded markedly in the past two centuries. War, statecraft and diplomacy have been joined by social, cultural, environmental, and a host of other histories, filling in some of the blank pages on women, children and subaltern populations. But despite this, and an admittedly more limited broadening of the profession in terms of race, gender and class, relatively little has happened to brighten history's content. A brief review of the module options on offer to students in my own department reveals titles replete with words such as Dystopia, Nuclear Disaster, Genocide, Rape, Anti-Semitism, War, Hunger, Famine, Fascist, Empire, Slavery, Death Camps and Hostile Environment. The only impact of the broadening of the profession's interests and profile, it is tempting to conclude, has been to expose swathes of previously neglected misery.

History as a subject undoubtedly suffers from what positive psychologists call negativity bias: a human tendency to remember unresolved and bad situations more clearly and with more frequency than happy outcomes.[23] Does this matter? Is the mental well-being of our students negatively impacted by the content we teach them? Positive psychology encourages its patients to become content with their past, as an element of being happy in the present and to enable them to look to the future with optimism. It is premised, *contra* Freud, on the notion that 'excessive focussing on the past had the framing effect of giving it excessive salience, making it more difficult to make progress'.[24] This is a critique not just of psychoanalysis but of all dwelling on unhappy histories. Debriefing after accidents, for example, can be seen as re-traumatising and negative, and we might extend this to historical investigations which entail a collective rehearsing of past traumas, with the potential to engender a vicious circle of depressive and disabling thoughts. Psychologists measuring brain activity with a PET scanner have detected how exposure to different information and images creates different reactions and moods, and judging by our module titles most history degrees are the equivalent to being shown three continuous years of horrendous pictures.

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[20] S. Marchand, 'Flourishing with Herodotus', in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. McMahon,140–54.

[21] E. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1782), ch. 3, 43.

[22] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Kitchener, ON, 2001), 41.

[23] See A. Vaish, T. Grossmann, A. Woodward, 'Not all emotions are created equal: the negativity bias in social-emotional development', *Psychological Bulletin*, 134 (2008), 383–403.

[24] R. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005) 195.

This, however, is far from the whole story. Even if one accepts the critique of Freudian methods, it is still possible to reject any simplistic parallel between individual psychology and societal level questions. Foregrounding well-being, moreover, does not – as is sometimes assumed – preclude, or even discourage the teaching of difficult topics. What it does ask of us is to recognise when material might be challenging and to introduce it to students self-consciously and framed within appropriate supporting structures. To take an extreme example, a concern with well-being is not an argument against teaching the history of sexual violence. Such histories are vital in addressing injustice and challenging contemporary attitudes in ways that can enhance well-being for all in the longer term. It is even possible to make the argument that any short-term distress can create a 'stress inoculation' effect, which facilitates a deeper long-term sense of well-being.[25] Teaching with well-being, that is, does not demand that we forego the dark side of history, but that we show care and consideration when teaching it.

There is no evidence that the *content* of what we teach is inherently detrimental to student mental health. But nor is there much to suggest that our programmes *enhance* well-being. The average LS score for students participating in our survey was 6.9. This compares with a recent UK average across the whole population of 6.8 and an OECD average of 6.7.[26] The results, that is, are broadly in line with what we might expect, although perhaps a little on the low side, as those aged under 30 and better educated have, until relatively recently, tended to produce more markedly higher than average scores.[27] We need, of course, to keep in mind that the sample size is small, and this becomes an even more important consideration when we break down the results by year group, an exercise that points to LS declining marginally across the three years of a history degree. Without overstating the preciseness of these results, the tentative conclusion we might draw is that history undergraduates are no more and no less happy than the national average, and that the overall impact on well-being of studying for a history degree is probably no better than neutral.

This is a slightly disappointing conclusion. In theory, history degrees provide ample opportunities to fulfil Seligman's PERMA characteristics: Positive Emotions, induced by a past rich in awe-inspiring content; Engagement, found in deep reading techniques; Relationships, forged in seminar teaching; Meaning, established in working to a defined end; and Accomplishment, experienced at each semester staging post. In their studies history students ought to enjoy an opportunity to reach the highest level in

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[25] D. Meichenbaum and R. Novaco, 'Stress Inoculation: A Preventative Approach', *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 7 (1985), 419–35.

[26] OECD, *How's Life? 2020: Measuring Well-being*: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9870c393-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/9870c393-en.

[27] R. Hall, 'University students more at risk of depression than non-students – study', *The Guardian*, 29 Sept. 2023.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs and to feel, even if only fleetingly, a state of self-actualisation.[28] Moreover, many of the skills we train our students in as historians might be thought to enable them simultaneously to manage their own well-being better. For example, the historian's skills for interpreting evidence and probing competing narratives form an interesting parallel with some Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT) techniques, which are similarly concerned with the ways in which we tell (ourselves) stories and learn to acknowledge subjectivity as an inherent part of being human. Why then are our students not happier?

It is, of course, important to keep in mind that history students do not exist hermetically sealed qua history students. They are subjected to the same external pressures – including the cost-of-living crisis and social media engagement – as others in their age group. Digging deeper into our survey results shows that 60 per cent of respondents claimed to be suffering 'stress' and 40 per cent 'mental health concerns', with a similar proportion worried about 'finance'. It is noticeable that these top three concerns relate to being a student generally rather than being a historian specifically, and the same is true of the top three areas in which respondents wanted help: 'motivation' (over 50 per cent); essay writing (40 per cent); and 'time management' (around a third). One conclusion we might draw from this is that even if the content of history teaching does not harm student well-being, some of the pedagogic practice which surrounds its delivery might. Class presentations, essay deadlines and examinations are established causes of stress, especially among neurodiverse students. More broadly, many of our teaching practices – weekly classes, large lectures, online delivery, individual assessment – do little to counteract problems of non-clinical mental health needs, such as anxiety, loneliness and isolation.

Should history promote well-being?

History departments should promote the well-being of their students because it aids their study of history. The claim that increased '*well-being is synergistic with better learning*' makes intuitive sense and explains why those who teach, at all levels, 'are being increasingly challenged to centre wellbeing' in their programmes of learning.[29] Demonstrating a direct connection between an individual's well-being and their academic performance, however, it should be acknowledged, is not always possible. Naysayers can point to some limited evidence that the attributes historians need to develop – including critical and analytic thinking – might actually be better produced by negative moods, but more studies suggest the benefits of well-being in promoting a virtuous circle of performance. There is evidence that well-being at earlier stages of life is predictive of future well-being, and that by raising awareness of well-being we are helping our students to become better at managing their own mental health in the future.[30] There are, in short, good grounds for championing well-being as an aid to our students' broader development, and for supposing that a successful well-being strategy would have a positive impact on the various metrics, including the NSS and Graduate Outcomes, by which history departments are judged.

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[28] Maslow's hierarchy of needs progressed through physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, and esteem, up to self-actualisation: a sense of fulfilment of one's potential.

[29] M. E. P. Seligman, R. M. Ernst, J. Gillham, K. Reivich and M. Linkins, 'Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35 (2009), 293–311, at 294; S. Carter and C. Andersen, *Wellbeing in Educational Contexts* (Davis, CA, 2024), 16.

The results of our scoping study suggest that there already exists an imperfect understanding of this within UK HEI history departments. Almost all departments framed student well-being in one or more of three overlapping ways: teaching activities; pastoral support; and the wider culture of learning. In terms of teaching, well-being concerns were expressed in relation to questions of group size; variety of assessment; hands-on experiences; and timetabling. Pastoral support centred on the Personal Tutor system, finance and opportunities to socialise. Wider cultural well-being considerations around learning focused primarily on the transition to university and provision of study skills, alongside attendance and engagement monitoring, and, more rarely, what one institution described as the need for a 'growth mindset'. It was interesting to note that the overwhelming focus of reflections on well-being in history departments was on entry-year students.

This emphasis on the challenge of transitioning to university needs unpacking. It might simply reflect an understanding of the value of good habits imbibed early on, but it might also speak to an unacknowledged desire to create a more uniform student body. The frequent mention of Foundation programmes in this regard is particularly interesting. Does this indicate a deficit model approach, in which well-being is regarded as a tool to help make up for supposed academic shortcomings? Or, given that many Foundation programmes cater disproportionately for students from socio-economic backgrounds who are under-represented in university, is the primary concern acculturation? Whatever the case, we need to move beyond any tendency to regard well-being as a stage to be achieved, or a one-off entry and transition task. One respondent to the scoping study reflected on how their department had begun to consider extending induction activities across the first half of the term, rather than overwhelming incoming students in a tsunami of induction week information. This is a step forward in understanding transition as an ongoing process, but we also need a further acknowledgement that to be meaningful well-being needs to form part of the student experience across the three years of a history degree programme.

One reason why this does not happen now, or at least happens only in an *ad hoc*, inconsistent way, is that very few history departments have a member of staff with overall responsibility for well-being. While Personal Tutors are often charged, in general terms, with well-being responsibility for their individual tutees, there is rarely any assigned academic with responsibility for ensuring that the department maintains a collective well-being focus. In contrast to areas including research, impact, employability and social media, for which identifiable leads can be found, few history departments have a named well-being lead. Our scoping survey showed that where overall responsibility for well-being is assigned at all, it is packaged as a subsidiary concern in other administrative tasks. Even within this a surprising range of office-holders were identified. Many departments settled responsibility on the Programme Director (or equivalent), but other roles identified as leading on well-being included: Head of Department, Skills module coordinator, Senior Admissions Office, Associate Head, Senior Departmental Administrator, Director of EDI, Head of Welfare, Student Experiences Manager, Executive Dean, and Part One Coordinator. This absence of any clear consensus on where well-being should sit within the administrative framework of history departments is perhaps symptomatic of the more general lack of clarity about what well-being is and how it relates to historical study.

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[30] D. D. Danner, D. Snowdon and N. V. Friesen, 'Positive Emotions in Early Life and Longevity: Findings from the Nun Study', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80 (2001), 804–13; S. Colleen, J. Conley, J. A. Durlak and D. A. Dickson, 'An Evaluative Review of Outcome Research on Universal Mental Health Promotion and Prevention Programs for Higher Education Students', *Journal of American College Health*, 61 (2013), 286–301.

It may also reflect a residual hostility both to the concept of well-being and to the idea that the promotion of well-being is the responsibility of historians and history departments.

Historians' doubts about well-being

It was obvious when researching this topic that many practising historians are suspicious of well-being initiatives, on both intellectual and practical grounds. Some sympathise with the objections of those such as Kim Ecclestone who have characterised the integration of well-being into academic curricula as undermining subject knowledge and prompting an escape from 'hard study'.[31] Judging by conversations I have had I would suggest that a misleading belief in an opposition between (masculinised) 'hard work' and a 'soft' (feminised) well-being agenda is deep-rooted in the profession. More than one interlocutor was dismissive, with one making a disparaging reference to UCL's 'famous wellbeing alpacas' – an engaging but easily mocked initiative to help students 'de-stress' in the exam period – in order to clinch their case.[32] Well-being, that is, is seen by some as just too comfortable and reassuring to be compatible with a discipline built upon posing and probing discomforting questions.

Underlying this attitude are legitimate concerns that well-being can be used as a form of corporate performance – well-being washing – by universities and that the concept often aligns all too easily with ideological perspectives that encourage conformity and underplay systemic injustice.[33] For example, initiatives that encourage individuals to reconcile themselves to existing circumstances, such as Covey's Circles of Influence, Concern and Control might be read as inherently palliative, and thereby conservative in undermining longer-term struggles for reform.[34] The suspicion many historians harbour on this point is deepened both by the general profile of those advocating a well-being agenda – white, western and privileged by existing structural inequalities – and the false universalism implicit in some of their arguments.[35] Others may be concerned by the 'lightly de-theologised terms' in which well-being is too often discussed, and the dominance of the Templeton Foundation, an organisation with an openly ideological agenda, as the dominant funder of well-being initiatives in the humanities.[36]

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[31] K. Ecclestone, 'Are Universities encouraging Students to believe Hard Study is Bad for their Mental Health?', *Times Higher Education*, 2 Apr. 2020; K. Ecclestone and D. Hayes, 'Changing the Subject: The Educational Implications of Developing Emotional Well-being', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35 (2009), 371–89. See also K. Ecclestone and D. Hayes, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (2008).

[32] See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/events/2024/apr/ssw-exam-season-toolkit-wellbeing-alpacas.

Acknowledging these concerns, however, is not in itself an argument against the integration of well-being into historical study; it is an argument against an *uncritical* integration. Just because much of the work on well-being has been ahistorical, individualistic and culturally insensitive does not mean that it must be so. For one thing, not all work on well-being replicates these failings: Lynne Segal's *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2018), for example, looks beyond the individual to understand happiness in the structure and context of political economy. For another, any history of well-being can usefully highlight and explore these failings, just as any discussion of well-being in a specific historical period can highlight the context of exploitation and oppression in which notions of well-being are constructed and contested. As a recent piece by Mia Bay has highlighted, an African American history of well-being provides insights with which 'few works of positive psychology engage'.[37] History, as Peter Stearns has argued, has the potential to deepen and enrich the well-being agenda.[38] This will prove doubly valuable if, simultaneously, it can benefit our students. To do so successfully, however, will require some rethinking of how we teach, and our students learn, history.

It is here that we run into the practical objections of those who argue that the promotion of well-being is not the responsibility of history departments. This view, which was partially articulated in the detailed responses to the scoping study, consists of two overlapping objections concerning capacity and capability. The first is that it is unrealistic to expect historians and history departments to resolve issues of student well-being. This point is, in a limited sense, unanswerable: we cannot resolve all the travails of our students. Many of the so-called 'Big Seven' factors affecting personal happiness, including family relations, finance and (physical) health, lie beyond the influence of any academic department.[39] And this feeds into the second objection: historians are overworked and ill-equipped to take on tasks that are more properly performed by the central university. Why should an expert on seventeenth-century agrarian reform or twelfth-century Papal letters concern themselves with issues that are more properly the province of the university's professional and welfare services?

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[33] W. Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold us Happiness* (2015).

[34] S. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People* (2004), 83.

[35] N. Eustace, '"Beauty is Universal": Virtue, Aesthetics, Emotion, and Race in James Logan's Atlantic Moral Sense Philosophy', in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. McMahon, 174.

[36] D. Graham Burnett, 'History, Humanities and the Human', in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. McMahon, 30. The Templeton Foundation is the major funder of the Humanities and Human Flourishing initiative: https://www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org/.

[37] Mia Bay, 'Toward a History of Black Happiness', in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. McMahon, 184–97.

[38] P. N. Stearns, 'Well-being and a Usable Past: The Role of Historical Diagnosis', in *History and Human Flourishing*, ed. McMahon, 100.

The answer, of course, is that they should not. It is never appropriate for historians to provide surrogate support services or make good a shortfall in counselling provision. But framing the question in this way reinforces a misunderstanding of what well-being in education means. It should not be thought of as substituting or even supplementing professional and welfare services, which will continue to have their own specialist role to play. It means, rather, creating the conditions in which our students can best learn, flourish and thrive, and this needs to happen at the level of the individual discipline.

The results of our survey make clear the extent to which student engagement is overwhelmingly discipline-, indeed module-, based. Over a third of respondents indicated that they had never had any contact with central services, and those who had usually initiated contact to help resolve issues relating to individual modules, including assessment submission and adjustment, and timetable clashes. The centrality of modules to the student experience was further confirmed by the contrasting responses to questions about Academic Tutors and module tutors. Almost 40 per cent said that they had never engaged with their Academic Tutor, whereas almost 60 per cent identified module tutors as someone they would approach with a problem. The point here is that well-being initiatives will only reach (and have a chance of success with) most students through modules. All the alternative potential modes of transmission, such as student services, student counselling, or the Student Union sit outside the immediate learning environments in which students directly engage with the university. Academic staff and the curriculum are the only guaranteed points of contact between the university and its students, and 'the curriculum is the one consistent element in students' lives in which universities can influence behaviour and learning'.[40] To be successful, a well-being agenda needs to operate at the point at which students primarily exist and function: their discipline.

How can historians teach with well-being?

The question of 'how can historians teach with well-being?' might be more appositely phrased as 'how can historians teach with *more* well-being?' There are, and have always been, elements of well-being in history teaching and delivery. To make an only slightly facetious point, Leopold von Ranke would never have considered bringing an alpaca onto campus, but by pioneering seminar teaching and developing close source-reading techniques, he might be said to have delivered two of Seligman's five-part PERMA: Engagement, through deep reading, and Relationships, forged in class work. Just because this was not conceptualised or expressed in the language of positive psychology, does not mean that Ranke's teaching did not enhance well-being. What follows then is less about innovation per se, and more about increasing self-awareness and reflexivity, as part of a more systematic and self-conscious attempt to enhance existing practices so that we teach with *more* well-being. The best way to achieve this is through an ongoing process of curricular infusion.

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[39] Layard, *Happiness*, 62–3.

[40] G. Hughes, 'Support Student Wellbeing Through Curriculum Design and Delivery', *The Watt Works Quick Guide*, 20 (n.d.), 1–3.

The term curricular infusion refers to the practice of embedding discipline-specific materials and activities into the curriculum, in order to encourage discussion and reflection on a particular issue.[41] Rather than demand new structures or content, a curricular infusion approach would build upon existing module content in ways which foreground well-being. A philosophy module on existentialism, for example, would build out from readings from Dostoevsky, Sartre, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche into a discussion of loneliness, alienation, stress, anxiety and depression.[42] History modules are replete with similar opportunities. These might be direct (a module on J. S. Mill might discuss adolescent depression) or indirect (a module on medieval anti-Semitism might provoke reflections on the experience of discrimination today). A module on monasticism could help students to think about friendship; one on the First World War could encourage them to contemplate separation and fear; a module on the witch craze might be an opportunity to ponder paranoia and misogyny.

It is worth emphasising that what we are advocating here is the pursuit of a well-being agenda *through* existing modules. Although there might be some advantages in creating new, explicitly well-being-focused, history modules – for example, inviting students to reflect upon the history of the concept would, implicitly, provide them with an opportunity to reflect upon their own well-being – this would also entail downsides. Our scoping study suggests that no UK HEI history department runs a dedicated well-being module at present, and there is no evidence of enthusiasm for introducing one. Our survey revealed a large degree of uncertainty about what such an initiative would look like: 40 per cent of respondents answered 'Maybe' to the question whether a dedicated well-being module was a good idea. And those history departments that have experimented with well-being drop-in sessions reported very low levels of engagement. Making participation compulsory, in the form of a module, would risk alienating the very students we are seeking to aid. The other risk in creating a dedicated module is that it would tend to silo well-being into one spot in the curriculum and reinforce the tendency to see well-being as a one-off, transitional stage. This is unlikely to achieve enduring gains: there is cross-disciplinary evidence that the benefits of stand-alone psycho-educational modules teaching positive psychology are not sustained beyond the period of the module.[43] All this suggests that to be successful well-being initiatives need to be integrated into modules across the curriculum.[44]

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[41] Union of Students in Ireland and National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, *Embedding Wellbeing across the Curriculum in Higher Education*, Oct. 2021.

https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Supporting-Wellbeing-in-Practice-October-2021.pdf.

[42] Olson and Riley, 'Weaving the Campus Safety Net', 28.

The first step to making this happen is for every history department to have an assigned advocate, with a brief to promote well-being both within the overall programme *and* within individual modules.[45] Although we have argued that well-being concerns are not alien or extrinsic to the study of history, it is also the case that the discipline rarely foregrounds them. There is, for example, no explicit mention of well-being in the most recent QAA *Subject Benchmark Statement* (March 2022) for history.[46] An assigned advocate in every history department is needed, therefore, to perform two functions. First, the advocate must to review the programme overall in the light of Seligman's PERMA characteristics. The increasing awareness across HEIs of the need for coherent programme level design needs to embrace well-being. In particular, we need to review the balance of different PERMA characteristics at different stages of the degree, for example the importance of relationships in the first term, and the need to build a sense of accomplishment at key stages. Second, curricular infusion will only succeed with the widest possible buy-in from the staff who deliver modules, and this will be best achieved when championed *within* the department, by individuals who are sensitive to disciplinary concerns, and who can guide and reassure colleagues.

Remaking history modules

The key to promoting well-being through history teaching lies at the modular level, and the key innovation we can all make is to reflect on the extent to which our existing module content and teaching might be enhanced. This is an incremental agenda for change, which builds on existing practices, but which could have a transformative effect on the student experience. In the first instance, change will be, by necessity, teacher-led, but reforms that develop in a collaborative, co-constructive dialogue with students themselves are likely to be most effective. This can take different forms. Co-construction might occur within the module: on one Foundation level module which I convened students were able to vote to determine the subject content of the second half of the course each year. Or it might occur at the design stage. For example, I have been involved in the design of a new Part One module, ‘Making History and You’, where we worked with the university’s Inclusion Consultants – current students from a range of disciplines who are paid to advise staff on how to make their courses and services more accessible and inclusive – to help build a module with well-being at its heart.[47] Some colleagues will be more comfortable with this level of co-construction than others. But what all module convenors can do, in consultation with a departmental well-being advocate, is to consider how the design and delivery of their modules map onto the ‘five ways to well-being’ template, developed by the New Economics Foundation.[48] This provides five simple tests through which we can all consider the extent to which our teaching contributes to student well-being.

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[43] C. Hobbs, S. Jelbert, L. R. Santos and B. Hood, 'Long-Term Analysis of a Psychoeducational Course on University Students' Mental Well-being', *Higher Education*. Published online 8 Mar. 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01202-4.

[44] A.-M. Houghton and J. Anderson, *Embedding Mental Wellbeing in the Curriculum: Maximising Success in H. E.* (York, 2017).

[45] History departments are structured differently in different institutions, and it may not always be possible to create new roles. In these instances, student well-being should be made an explicit responsibility of an existing senior role.

[46] *Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Subject Benchmark Statement: History*, 5th edn (Gloucester, 2022).

Connect

Our first responsibility is to ensure that our students feel a direct connection to the module they are studying, and the initial focus for that is through the module tutor. Something as simple as remembering and using students’ names in class, and taking a moment to learn correct pronunciations, can help deepen a personal connection and was mentioned as important by respondents to our scoping study. Specifically, as historians we can also help deepen connections by telling stories about the past and providing a space for students to reflect upon how an aspect of their own life – or their family history – might connect to the module content. We should also aim to humanise and demystify our subject matter. When discussing the approaches taken by different historians, for example, why not have slides with their photographs on, rather than just their names or book jackets? Those who are comfortable discussing their own experiences – what first drew you to the subject? what problems did you encounter? – can also help students to understand that their own difficulties are a necessary stage to work through. Personalising one’s teaching in this way can be done to different extents. Few will match the bravura performance of Sarah Chaney’s outstanding *Am I Normal? The 200-year Search for Normal People and Why they Don’t Exist* (2022), which frames an exploration of modern thinking about normality in the tale of her own personal development as an undergraduate, but even sharing snippets of who we are, and how this relates to our research, can be valuable.

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[47] On Reading’s Inclusion Consultant scheme see https://www.reading.ac.uk/essentials/Diversity-and-Inclusion/Get-Involved/Inclusion-Consultants.

[48] These were outlined in the report by Foresight, *Mental Capital and Wellbeing: Making the Most of Ourselves in the 21st Century* (Government Office for Science, 2008). See also: https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/five-ways-to-wellbeing-1.pdf.

Be active

The benefits of physical movement in learning were another theme that emerged strongly in the scoping study. One institution laid great stress on the importance of field trips; another had a rule that at least two sessions per module were delivered outside the classroom. For most, however, there was no systematic approach, and existing initiatives, such as visiting archives and museums, had developed in an *ad hoc*, unstructured way. We all instinctively understand that ten- or twelve-week modules, in which students take the same seats in the same classrooms for two or more hours at a time, session after session, can induce intellectual torpor. But breaking this cycle can be difficult, especially with large-sized groups, and study trips can create their problems in terms of cost and health and safety risks. At the very least, however, the injunction 'be active' might mean exploring different parts of a campus, or students simply moving around different breakout groups or considering information sheets pinned to different parts of the classroom.

For the more ambitious the recent upsurge of interest in the history of pedestrianism provides an opportunity to link an increasingly vibrant area of history with the established mental health benefits of walking.[49] A good example of how this might be done could be seen in the Goldsmiths, University of London module 'Walking through London's History', in which students used urban walking as a means to explore the city's history, and produced public-facing blogs charting their experiences.[50] Similar modules, with an urban or rural, landscape-focus, might be developed in almost any location. More broadly, there is also an opportunity to build upon the profession's growing interest in outdoor praxis – including the archive of the feet – as a means to explore ways in which walking simultaneously aids well-being and helps history connect to ecological and post humanist agendas.[51]

Keep learning

History demands an unusually high proportion of independent learning. Judging by the module descriptions at my own institution, there is an expectation that *c*. 85 per cent of a history student's study time is conducted independently outside the classroom. Our design and planning of modules ought to do much more to reflect this. At present there is a disproportionate focus on the content of contact hours – what will I say in the lecture? what materials will I discuss in class? – and far less on how students spend their learning hours outside class, or how the two connect , but this is vital in history. We need to acknowledge that independent learning is often disorienting for students who, prior to university, have almost certainly only experienced a more rigid and directed learning environment. There are some tried and tested mechanisms that can help, including Weekly Learning Plans, which set clear expectations, and Worksheets, which help to structure individual learning. More ambitiously, many universities operate Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) programmes in which students in an older cohort facilitate supplementary group study sessions. This is a well-established scheme, which research suggests has a dual benefit, for the students on module and for those who act as PAL leaders.[52] Both groups of students gain in terms of social connectedness, self-development and self-efficacy. However individual departments set about addressing this problem, the central point is that we want our students to have independence and self-direction, but this will not happen automatically; we need to help them to find ways to develop these attributes.

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[49] See, for example, K. Andrews, *Wanderers: A History of Women and Walking* (2021). For research specifically exploring the benefits of walking for students see J. Ma, J. M. Williams, P. G. Morris and S. W. Y. Chan, 'Effectiveness of a Mindful Nature Walking Intervention on Sleep Quality and Mood in University Students during Covid-19: A Randomised Control Study' *Explore*, 19 (2022), 405–16.

[50] See https://wtlh.wordpress.com/about/.

[51] For example, D. Gange, 'Retracing Trevelyan? Historical Practice and the Archive of the Feet', *Green Letters*, 21 (2017), 246–61.

Take notice

One aspect of this might be found in the fourth of the New Economics Foundation's 'five ways to well-being'. *Take notice* is an invitation to relate module learning to what is going on in the wider world. The crucial point is to make a space within our modules for students to consider and express how they feel about the material under consideration. The well-being benefit of this is premised on the principle that we feel better about ourselves when we link our learning to other aspects of our lives, and when we are encouraged to relate it to those things we care about. In studying history, this can work either at a broad political level, in which we relate historic events and movements to contemporary parallels: what we might think of as a 'long view' approach. Or it can be much more personal and individual, where students explore the experiences of historical actors in relation to their own feelings and emotions. For the latter, the recent interest evinced by historians in questions of empathy offers some rich supporting soil, but it is perhaps worth emphasising that this *Take notice* approach can be made to work for almost any area, from the history of warfare to the history of emotions.[53]

Give

The fifth of the ways to well-being might be the most difficult to achieve for history students. Opportunities to *give* – in terms of sharing information, insight and understanding – are comparatively limited in history degrees. The proportion of time spent on independent study means that there is nothing comparable to the collective lab culture of natural sciences, and the extent of optionality in the second and third years of most history degrees militates against the kind of cohort identity which programmes with more compulsory elements can foster. History degrees, moreover, culminate in the (potentially isolating) experience of the dissertation. There are also broader forces that tend against a culture of giving, including tuition fees, which strengthen a transactional (or perhaps even mercantilist) attitude to degree-level study. Together these factors mean that we cannot expect a collaborative approach to be automatic or immediate for our students. That said, PAL schemes and group work can both help, and at the heart of the study of history at university sits the seminar which, when it functions as it should, is a giving experience. To facilitate this, we need to develop more open and inclusive environments – real and virtual – for our students, from day one in their degree programmes, to help them overcome engrained images of education as competition and to build their confidence in collaborating.

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[52] S. Bailey, 'The Meaning Making Journey of Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leaders in HE', *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 15 (2021), 55–69.

[53] S. Fox, 'Archival Intimacies: Empathy and Historical Practice', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1 (2023), 241–65.

Conclusion

A conversation centred on how we can better integrate well-being into the teaching of history in UK HEIs is overdue. The suspicions and anxiety with which the term has sometimes been regarded need to be addressed and allayed, as a first step towards a fuller, more systematic integration of the well-being agenda into the design and delivery of our history modules. This is a task that we all need to share. The challenge of well-being among young people is societal, and even within universities action to address it needs to be supported at an institutional level. But a recognition of these wider contexts does not obviate the need for us to act directly, as historians, for our students. We have an opportunity to do more to promote well-being through history teaching, and we have a responsibility to discuss more widely how we might achieve this.

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