

# FORUM

MEMBER  
MAGAZINE

*Discussing international education*



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## 06

“Is it realistic to expect students to develop an ‘optimistic explanatory style’ in the middle of a psychological perfect storm?”

HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS THRIVE

## 18

“Everything comes back to the idea of belonging to a diverse community, with fewer and more porous boundaries”

IN CONVERSATION WITH  
NIC BEECH



## 26

“We can help a lot just by knowing our target group and helping them to help themselves – including by seeking psychological counselling”

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE



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“Support offered to students has to be backed up by genuine actions and appropriate budget allocations, rather than merely paying lip service”

INCLUSIVE SERVICES AND SAFE SPACES



# EDITORIAL

Well-being in higher education is not a new topic, and the EAIE has been actively supporting discussion and professional development on student advising and counselling within its community for the last decade. Indeed, the Spring 2012 edition of *Forum* looked closely at the student experience and the mental health of international and mobile students in particular. More recently, two *Pathways to Practice* e-publications have offered practical and easily implementable ideas on related topics – ‘Supporting international doctoral students’ (August 2020) and ‘Fostering positive coping and resilience among international students’ (November 2021).

However, COVID-19 has shone a much brighter spotlight on the well-being of both students and staff, not to mention the many other stakeholders and community members who support the work of our institutions. In that context, as we continue to re-build our lives and our institutions from the personal and professional challenges of the global pandemic, it is timely to re-assess what is meant by well-being in an international education context, how institutions are responding to changing needs, and whether we’re doing okay.

The Summer 2023 issue of *Forum* looks at well-being from a number of perspectives, essentially asking how higher education institutions can enable environments that foster health and wellness among students and staff in an international context. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the ways in which international experiences themselves can be leveraged to facilitate emotional resilience, recognising that the challenges of an international

experience are exactly what fuels the kind of transformative learning that is at the heart of internationalisation.

As such, the various articles in this edition focus on the different actors in relation to well-being – be it a counselling service or the international office – or on the collective responsibility to foster a healthy campus environment. Meanwhile, others look at new mechanisms to provide mental health support online, and the future of this form of service delivery post-pandemic. Throughout, these articles consider the boundaries between culture and personal well-being, and what it means to be displaced temporarily or permanently, with tips and guidance on how to leverage international experiences to secure mental fitness.

I am delighted that Prof Nic Beech, Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University in the United Kingdom, agreed to be interviewed for this issue. Prof Beech took up his current position in February 2020 and cut his teeth in the leadership and management of Middlesex University at a time of massive upheaval for staff and students. Appointed recently as a Commissioner for the UK’s International Higher Education Commission, it is fascinating to read of Prof Beech’s tactical responses to well-being concerns at his institution and, in particular, his advocacy of co-leadership with students in this space, ensuring that students and staff are engaged in a really human way with each other.

Also included in this edition is a profile of Stephanie Griffiths, who received the 2022 EAIE Award for Outstanding Contribution in recognition of her important contributions to supporting international education by ensuring that the



students and staff within our institutions can thrive. Having worked in the field of psychological counselling for over 30 years at King’s College London, Stephanie is now an intercultural consultant/trainer at her own intercultural consultancy for higher education institutions. She has developed several programmes of outreach and training, with the aim of enabling home and international students, academics and frontline administrative staff to be trained in the psychological pressures that they may encounter, particularly post-pandemic.

I am pleased that this edition of *Forum* makes a further contribution to the EAIE’s longstanding focus on well-being in international education, and I hope that it will help frame further discussion among EAIE members. With thanks to the authors and to Queenie Lam on the EAIE Publications Committee, who joined me in reviewing submissions for this issue.

I hope that you enjoy reading this edition of *Forum*.

— DOUGLAS PROCTOR, EDITOR  
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# CONTRIBUTORS

## *Jessica Price*

**Assistant Professor in Corporate Health Management and Wellbeing, LUNEX University**

Having been an international student in both the US and Germany, Jessica understands the challenges and opportunities that international students face. Her hobbies include enjoying 'coffee culture', yoga and travel.

## *Kieran McGrane*

**Head of English and Academic Skills, Study Group Holland ISC**

Kieran's background is in English for Academic Purposes. He has lived in Ireland, Spain and the UK before settling down in Amsterdam.

## *Danny Recio*

**Co-Founder and Program Director at Pathfinder and The Bridge**

Danny often says that while he was born in Costa Rica, he was "born an adult in South Africa" while studying abroad in Cape Town. In his work, he designs experiential learning and cross-cultural experiences as therapeutic tools for 'lost seekers'.

## *Heather Tracy*

**Co-Founder and Executive Director of Pathfinder, The Bridge and Supportive Immersion Institute**

Heather is a psychologist and educational administrator with over two decades of experience. She is also a certified yoga instructor who loves adopting pets, dancing and reading nerdy nonfiction books.

## *Alexandra Duarte*

**Project and Communication Officer, UNICA**

With a background in communication and international relations, Alexandra is passionate about storytelling and creative writing. She also loves travel, DIY and all things Taylor Swift.

## *Laura Colò*

**Project Officer, UNICA**

Laura studied international relations and then travelled around Asia for eight months before she started working for UNICA. In her free time, she enjoys sports, dressmaking and reading books, as well as volunteering for several associations.

## *Anna Sadecka*

**Head of International Relations Office, University of Warsaw**

Anna's passion for international education started with her own educational experiences in Poland and the United States. Outside work, her interests include travel and movies.

## *Anu Gräfin zu Dobna*

**Head of Subdivision International Degree Students, Doctoral Students & Researchers, University of Stuttgart**

Anu brings her background in social psychology to her work in international higher education. A dual citizen of Finland and Germany, she feels she is always "on her way home" when travelling between the two countries.

## *Angelina Rodríguez*

**Associate Professor, Lehigh University and Executive Coach/Partner, Evolution**

Angelina's background is in cultural studies, and she focuses on how people, cities and other entities make sense of their constant contact with difference. She has worked in Venezuela, Mexico, the UAE and the US.

## *Jennifer Fullick*

**Director of Health, Safety and Security, Institute for Study Abroad**

In addition to strategising all things related to health and safety, Jennifer enjoys spending time at home in Hawaii with her family, friends and foster cats.

## *Steve Hopkins*

**Senior Group Account Manager, Cultural Insurance Services International**

Steve works with about 100 universities and companies with a focus on international travel and risk. He writes, grills, gardens and plays way too much ping pong.

## *Kevin J. McNamara*

**Director, Scotland Programmes, Institute for Study Abroad**

A year abroad spent in Barcelona and Chicago started a lifelong passion of working in different countries for Kevin, who has since spent time in Italy, Germany, Austria, France and now Scotland.

## *Géraldine Dufour*

**Director, Therapeutic Consultations**

As a former Erasmus exchange student herself, Géraldine is passionate about helping institutions meet international students' counselling and mental health support needs.

## *Stella Saliari*

**Researcher and Social Justice Consultant**

Stella has studied in Germany, the UK and the Netherlands. She is a podcaster, popcorn and ice cream lover, and if she had to choose one word to describe herself it would be 'movement'.

# FINDING THE PATH TO MENTAL FITNESS

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In the midst of increasing numbers of students struggling with significant mental health challenges, it's easy to lose sight of the even greater number of youths who are 'languishing': they're not in acute danger yet, but they could be soon if we don't act. Thoughtfully-delivered international experiences, embedded in a framework that puts student well-being at the centre, might be just what the doctor ordered to help students reach a state of mental fitness.

**A**t a time when mental health issues are on the rise and guided opportunities to build mental fitness are scarce, international educators are under increasing pressure to prepare students for what lies beyond their university, be it a continued educational journey or employment.

Although technological advances have increased access to education and helped students overcome various challenges, tech has also exacerbated anxiety and stress via social media pressures and a flood of information, conflicting ‘facts’ and competing propaganda. They need to self-educate quickly to adapt to tech advances, and they are expected to exert higher levels of agency while often receiving less real-world preparation.

#### LANGUISHING YOUTH

During COVID-19 lockdowns, students experienced all of these dynamics without the opportunity to travel, socialise and build crucial developmental skills needed for maturation.

As a result, many young adults are ‘doing OK’ and are generally ‘functional’ but describe their life as stressful and plagued with mental fatigue and emotional burnout. In 2021, author Adam Grant called this “languishing”, which is characterised by a sense of emptiness, stagnation, numbness and difficulty in accessing feelings of joy and satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Languishing is not a mental illness, but it greatly increases the risk of developing a major depressive disorder.<sup>2</sup>

#### GUIDED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Higher education institutions cannot rid the world of mental illness, but they can focus on mental fitness as an empowering way to help students thrive. While mental illness is a risk that requires a psychotherapist, mental fitness is a resilience factor better gained from guided learning experiences.<sup>3</sup>

If framed and implemented properly, experiential international education can be instrumental in supporting languishing students by challenging their openness and adaptability and inviting them to be reflective and develop more robust personal narratives. It can also support the development of maturity,

confidence and purpose, as well as resilience, creative problem-solving, cognitive complexity and divergent thinking.

By travelling to new destinations and living and studying abroad, students are inherently conquering several dimensions of physical, mental and emotional wellness via cultural immersion, homestays, community volunteering, language development, exploring new activities and trying new things.

However, sending students abroad without the necessary support can cause more harm than good. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development research noted that learning is most effective when the learner is guided outside their comfort zone just enough to be alert and curious about novelty, without being overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, students thrive not when left alone but when guided by skilled educators or peers.

#### TOOLS OF THE TRADE

What tools exist to support educators in this style of youth development? One coaching framework is Recio and Tracy’s Supportive Immersion Theory, which employs empathetic connection, collaborative empowerment and process-based scaffolding.<sup>5</sup> The framework helps develop PROPS skills, meaning students become:

- **Proactive** in finding their purpose
- **Resilient** in times of struggle
- **Open** and collaborative
- Creative in **problem-solving**
- Skilled at **self-governance**

These skills are all developed through international education experiences, which can lead the way in filling maturation gaps as well as taking students from languishing to flourishing.

One Supportive Immersion Theory study abroad participant in 2020 expressed their growth in resilience as follows: “Having to deal with uncomfortable situations really gave me a new perspective on how I need to focus on my priorities and how much the short-term discomforts are worth it in the long term.”<sup>6</sup> Another outlined new skills in flexibility, adaptability and cognitive complexity: “Spending

time with people from a different culture, living with them and becoming their friend has made me realise that my way is not always the way.”<sup>7</sup> These reflections represent mental fitness and PROPS skill development achieved through intentional international education.

#### PROGRAMMES TO SUPPORT MENTAL FITNESS

There are programmes that specialise in supporting participants with diagnosed psychological disorders (therapeutic young adult programmes) and there are others that specialise in the ‘languishing’ population (intentional international education programmes). While the latter do not specifically focus on mental health, they can support mental fitness if they employ evidence-based coaching methodologies. Doing so may help their participants be better positioned to not only avoid mental illness in the future but also flourish on their way to adulthood.

Higher education institutions work hard to foster wellness on their own campuses, but sometimes getting away from that campus is what students need most in order to test and build their resilience. Most study abroad experiences will be transformative for students, but certain programmes can intentionally incorporate mental health and sustainable living into the fabric of the course itself. Here are some essential components to keep in mind if you want to build or find such programmes:

- **Thorough admissions processes.** Admissions vetting systems should be used to determine whether a student is ready for an international programme, while counsellors and educational specialists should be consulted to

determine the level of support a student needs. In this way, students are set up for success by being placed within their Zone of Proximal Development.

- **Pre-enrolment and ongoing assessment.** Personality testing, surveys and vocational testing can be used to help clarify personal and professional paths and ongoing support needs. You can use a framework such as Pathfinder’s Nine Dimensions of Healthy Living to co-create a goal plan with students, helping them visualise, reflect on and revise their goals and integrate their experiences into their chosen path.<sup>8</sup>
- **Intentional frameworks.** Evidence-based methodological frameworks should be used that fit the ethos and local culture of the international education programme. For example, the Pathfinder study abroad programme harnesses Costa Rica’s cultural focus on happiness, pure living and ecological sustainability to help develop healthy lifestyles.
- **Faculty training.** It is not necessary for personnel to be clinical psychologists to support mental fitness. Life coaching can impact short- and long-term outcomes for study abroad participants. Likewise, administrators can develop specific staff training modules to support coaching that aligns with the values and purpose of the programme. In addition, programmes must care for the carers and provide ample opportunities for faculty support, coaching and teamwork so that the mentors are mentally fit to do their work.

With the COVID-19 pandemic subsiding and international travel resuming,

programmes have an opportunity to use powerful international education opportunities as rites of passage to support students’ mental fitness. Various support tools can help our industry to refine study abroad admissions processes, implement ongoing assessments, enhance faculty training and adopt frameworks that align with a programme and cultural guiding principles. This approach can support languishing students in finding their path to flourishing both personally and professionally.

— DANNY RECIO & HEATHER TRACY

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# EAIE BLOG SPOT

In between *Forum* issues, visit the EAIE blog for news, views and insights, anywhere and at your fingertips. Just grab yourself a comfy seat and start browsing!



07  
MAR

## Gender inequality in higher education: lessons from Ireland

The gender gap in higher education is a complex structural challenge. Ireland's recent review of gender equality indicates some promising paths forward.

<http://ow.ly/v9r450OAxUo>



20  
MAR

## 9 key components of positioning your institution abroad

In today's international higher education market, institutions need to stand out. Here are 9 tips to help yours do just that.

<http://ow.ly/txk350OAxWh>



23  
MAY

## Global internships: preparation for the new world of work

With skill shortages on the rise in developed economies, global internships offer one promising solution.

<http://ow.ly/al0U50OAxY3>

## EAIE PODCAST



29  
MAR

## Nadja Greku and Valeria Redjepagic: Roma in European higher education today

Explore how the underrepresented Roma community can gain greater access to higher education in Europe.

<http://ow.ly/6jll50OAxZ6>



26  
APR

## Adrienne Fusek & Adinda van Gaalen: International education, climate change and cognitive dissonance

Explore key conceptual and practical questions at the intersection of international education and climate action.

<http://ow.ly/nqeR50OAvOM>



24  
MAY

## Joana Westphal & John McNamara: Transnational education: UK perspectives

As access to the UK becomes more challenging for European students, are transnational education programmes the answer?

<http://ow.ly/1oIT50OAv2u>



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AMSTERDAM

Join expert trainers and international education professionals for these two-day courses in person at The Social Hub in Amsterdam. Gain practical skills through hands-on activities and connect with your peers in the coffee breaks and networking drinks.

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13-14 November 2023

Delve into crucial management issues that cause the most consternation: leading and motivating your staff, communication plans and time management. Learn best practices regarding managing an international office within higher education institutions.



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## Creating a positive international student experience

30 November-01 December 2023

Gain a better understanding of the various factors that can affect international and mobility students. Learn how to encourage cooperation between departments and develop the tools to influence decision-makers, change institutional practices and evaluate success.

# CALENDAR

04–06  
JULY

**18th Annual BUILA Conference**  
The route to a sustainable future

<https://www.buila.ac.uk/conference>

05–07  
JULY

**European Student Affairs Conference 2023**

Shaping change in student services

<https://www.studentenwerke.de/en/content/european-student-affairs-conference-2023>

23–25  
AUGUST

**IEASA 2023 Annual Conference**

Looking back - looking forward

<https://ieasa.studysa.org>



26–29  
SEPTEMBER

**33rd Annual EAIE Conference and Exhibition in Rotterdam**

Connecting currents

[www.eaie.org/rotterdam](http://www.eaie.org/rotterdam)

06–08  
NOVEMBER

**Conference of the Americas on International Education (CAEI)**

The future is now

<https://caie-caei.org/en/>

13–14  
NOVEMBER

**EAIE Academy in the City**

How to manage an international office

<https://www.eaie.org/training/academy-2023/how-manage-international-office.html>

15–17  
NOVEMBER

**2023 ARUA Biennial Conference**

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