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Wellbeing collections in UK academic libraries

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Abstract

Academic libraries in the UK are playing a more prominent role in the mental health and wellbeing of students. Wellbeing collections have emerged as one way to do this but are under-researched. The aim of this paper is to investigate the development of wellbeing collections at UK institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of participants at six different UK universities, each with varying strategic priorities, budgets, and student demographics. Data about each collection was also analysed. The collections had all been created in the last five years. They varied significantly in the range of content. All were based on extensive collaborations, but student involvement was low. All were actively promoted through multiple channels. A more systematic evaluation of these collections would support greater recognition of wellbeing support by libraries, but this is inhibited by limited resources and a lack of clarity of definition of wellbeing.

1. Introduction and context

In recent years, student mental health and wellbeing have become priorities for higher education institutions (Thorley, 2017). In the UK, current policies and guidelines concerning student mental health are moving towards a 'whole university' approach, which emphasises the need for integrated support across all areas of higher education (UUK, 2020). In response, UK academic libraries are taking an increasingly active role

in developing initiatives aimed at supporting student mental health and wellbeing (Cox & Brewster, 2020).

There have been many innovative projects and initiatives promoting student wellbeing in university libraries, from dog petting sessions through to guided meditation and yoga (Brewerton & Wooley, 2017). However, amongst these myriad schemes, perhaps the most traditional approach taken is the development of student-focused wellbeing collections. These are increasingly common in academic libraries, though existing literature regarding university wellbeing initiatives has focused on either leisure reading provision (Palmer, 2018) or on using library spaces to host student-centred wellbeing events. As a result, we do not know much about the content of wellbeing collections, where they are located and how they are promoted or evaluated. Nor do we understand the extent of partnership-working around wellbeing collections, especially student involvement. Knowing more would help us understand how the case for wellbeing services is being made and inform sector good practice.

To fill these gaps in our knowledge, this study focused specifically on wellbeing collections as distinct entities, aiming to explore the key characteristics and factors behind their development in six different UK academic institutions, through interviews with professionals responsible for their creation. Five research questions were posed:

1. What was the size and character of wellbeing collections?
2. How had they been developed, specifically what kind of collaborations, including with students, did this involve?
3. Where were the collections located?
4. How was their use promoted and evaluated?

5. To what extent is supporting student wellbeing perceived as a core service for academic libraries?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The evolving scope of bibliotherapy

The power of reading to enhance mental health and wellbeing underlies the practice of bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy is something of a contested term, reflecting varying levels of clinical involvement and differing views on the genres of literature that are seen to promote wellbeing. While the suffix '-therapy' would suggest a certain degree of clinical involvement in the practice, this is not always the case, for as Brewster (2018) explains, "the basic premise of bibliotherapy is that information, guidance and solace can be found through reading" (p. xiii).

The word 'bibliotherapy' was first coined in 1916 by essayist Crothers and had surges of scholarly interest in the 1960s and 70s (see Hannigan, 1962; Alston, 1962; Rubin, 1978). Yet is only over the past twenty years that the practice has gained widespread acceptance in the UK.

The nationwide roll-out of the Reading Well Books on Prescription scheme in 2005 renewed public and political interest in the therapeutic benefits of reading (Brewster, 2007). Developed by Dr Neil Frude, the aim was to address the national deficit of mental health provision by partnering public libraries with health services. Libraries were stocked with a list of therapeutic, self-help texts recommended by mental health professionals which could then be 'prescribed' to a patient by the health service, or loaned independently by library users (Frude, 2005). Year on year responses to the

scheme have remained largely positive (The Reading Agency, 2023a), and the remit of Reading Well has expanded significantly beyond resources based around particular health conditions. For instance, the Mood-boosting Books initiative, launched in 2013, promotes the use of "uplifting titles, including novels, poetry and non-fiction" recommended by other readers in order to support mental health and wellbeing (The Reading Agency, 2023b).

This move away from strictly medically informed self-help texts, towards the inclusion of imaginative literature for therapeutic use, is indicative of a wider shift within the practice of bibliotherapy. A shift which recognises the potential of using leisure reading as a creative therapy, and the power of sharing reading experiences in a non-clinical context. Since around 2010, research into bibliotherapy has had a greater focus on personal experiences of reading in order to bolster mental health and wellbeing (see Longden et al, 2015; Dowrick et al, 2012). Indeed, by focusing on the experiences and motivations of readers using books as therapy, Brewster (2016) developed four user-based models of bibliotherapy, which are summarised as follows:

- "Emotive bibliotherapy – an individual emotional connection with a work of imaginative literature, often validating feelings and decreasing isolation;
- Escapist bibliotherapy – a means of escaping from the negative experience of symptoms of mental health problems;
- Social bibliotherapy – the social discussion of texts in a group environment;
- Informational bibliotherapy – a quest for self-education and understanding about mental health problems."

(Brewster, 2016: p. 168).

The ‘emotive’ and ‘escapist’ models are perhaps of most interest when considering the interrelation between the reading of imaginative literature and bibliotherapy. Much of the research on this, whilst being very closely aligned with bibliotherapy, will rarely use the term explicitly (Billington, 2015; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002). The benefits accrued from such reading might be considered an example of what Brewster (2007) describes as ‘informal bibliotherapy’, meaning the unintentional positive effects on a reader’s wellbeing that engaging with imaginative literature can produce. As academic libraries are increasingly including leisure reading (see Porritt, 2019) as part of their overarching wellbeing provision, the extent to which the participants of this study have either incorporated or excluded imaginative literature when developing their wellbeing collection is an underlying concern of this research.

2.2. Academic libraries as a locus of wellbeing

Since introducing the ‘whole university’ approach (UUK, 2020) there has been a greater impetus for academic libraries to support student mental health and wellbeing (Bladek, 2021). Whilst the number of case studies based around the creation of student wellbeing collections continues to grow (see Academic Libraries North, 2022; Azadbakht & Englert, 2018), as yet there is no evidence base to show how these collections are being used, or the extent of their efficacy. As Cox and Brewster (2020a) argue, “bibliotherapy presents the most substantial development of thinking about wellbeing in the LIS professional literature” (p.160), and yet there is a marked absence of literature exploring the use of bibliotherapy in UK academic libraries. Cox

and Brewster (2020a) suggest a number of possible reasons for this, the first being that academic library services are moving away from their traditional emphasis on physical collections. In a recent SCONUL report produced by Pinfield, Cox and Rutter (2017) regarding the future of academic libraries, one of a number of trends noted was the inevitable shift towards a more 'service-oriented' approach.

Whilst it might be argued that providing a wellbeing collection is a service, to have a physical collection of curated resources might conflict with the views of those practitioners that wish to move away from the traditional idea of libraries as a place for books. Academic libraries have been remarkably responsive to the shifting strategic aims of their parent organisations, but Walton (2018) argues that the rush to seek innovative approaches to support these aims (see Edwards et al, 2022) risks practicalities regarding financial resources and staff knowledge bases being neglected. Indeed, this is supported by Cox and Brewster (2020a) who suggest that "a sustainable response from the profession to the 'crisis' in well-being needs to be rooted in the professional knowledge base" (p. 161). An alternative option for academic libraries might be to collaborate with outside partners to ensure that wellbeing initiatives are carried out effectively. For example, Ramsay and Aagard (2018) note that library staff at Boise State University in the US were trained by local health services to ensure that they were adequately prepared to meet the needs of emotionally distressed students on campus.

More important than additional training, however, is the need to hear and respond to student voices when tackling issues of mental health and wellbeing. The student-led action group Student Minds (2019b) created a co-production guide in order to aid

universities in developing appropriate and effective wellbeing initiatives in co-operation with their students. When interviewing participants responsible for the creation of their university wellbeing collection, therefore, it was one of the priorities for this study to determine the extent to which students were involved in the development of collection.

2.3. Situating this research project

As has been demonstrated, whilst the trend of broadening the traditional purview of academic libraries to include the provision of wellbeing support for students continues to gain momentum, there remains a lack of research exploring the use and development of wellbeing collections as distinct entities. In recent years, however, there have been various attempts to build shared resource hubs and evidence bases relating to student wellbeing interventions. Some of these have been organised by existing consortia, such as the Academic Libraries North *mental health and wellbeing advocacy resource* (2022) or the M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries *wellbeing: resources for library staff* (2023), which provide advice on best practice concerning the development of wellbeing initiatives in academic libraries. There have also been professional organisations, such as the National Acquisitions Group (2022), aiming to create a collaborative list of resources specifically for higher education institutions developing wellbeing collections. On a broader scale, there are research networks such as The Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN, 2023), and What Works Wellbeing (2023) seeking to address the current evidence gap regarding student mental health and wellbeing interventions.

3. Methodology

As the project aimed to gather in-depth, personal perspectives of librarians responsible for wellbeing collections on how and why wellbeing collections are developed, a qualitative approach was appropriate, allowing the researchers to look "beneath the surface" of collected data, drawing out rich and complex narratives through semi-structured interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The research adopted a broadly interpretivist stance, acknowledging that participants understandings of wellbeing collections were shaped by their working environment and personal experiences. As research in this area is relatively limited, the study was inductive in nature, allowing themes and theories to develop as the research process progressed.

As the literature has revealed, often the introduction of wellbeing initiatives in universities is brought about by a change in strategic priorities, whether on a national or local level. Therefore, contextual information, such as student population size, library budget limitations and organisational culture was gathered for each participating institution. This information was intended to supplement and contextualise the collected interview data.

3.1. Sampling

Purposive, snowball sampling was used in selecting participants for the study, in order to ensure that the institutions chosen were information-rich cases "from which one [could] learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002: 169). As far as was possible in a small-scale study, efforts were made to ensure that the sampled institutions represented the diversity of UK HE institutions.Staff members from six different academic institutions were contacted via

email and invited to take part in the study. The majority of the participants were sourced via the Academic Libraries North mental health and wellbeing advocacy resource (2022).Ultimately, the sample consisted of six senior members of staff from different institutions (Table 1): five from the academic library service, and one from the student counselling team.

Table 1: Overview of participating institutions

Identifier	Institution Type	Size	Participant Role
University A	Russell Group	Very large (>30,000)	Senior library staff member
University B	Russell Group	Very large (>28,000)	Senior library staff member
University C	Russell Group	Very large (>27,000)	Senior library staff member
University D	Pre-1992	Large (>21,000)	Senior library staff member
University E	Post-1992	Very large (>25,000)	Senior member of student counselling service
University F	Post-1992	Medium (>11,000)	Senior library staff member

Lincoln and Guba (1985) observe that "a major advantage of the interview is that it permits the respondent to move back and forth in time – to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (p. 273). Indeed, giving the participants space for retrospective thought was particularly important in terms of understanding how wellbeing collections develop over time. Another key benefit of interviewing

participants is that it "provides them and the interviewer with the opportunity to clarify meanings and shared understanding" (Pickard, 2013: p.196). With these advantages in mind, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary mode of data collection for the project.

Pickard (2013) advises that when designing an interview, "piloting for structure and question style is extremely important" (p. 198). Therefore, prior to data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with a junior staff member from a non-participating academic library. This led to the development of the final interview guide. The interview guide began by asking participants to explain the development of their collection. It then probed topics including the content and location of the collection, student involvement in its development, promotion, challenges and evaluation techniques. As Braun and Clarke (2013) note, in semi-structured interviews "question wording and order are contextual, and responsive to the participant's developing account". In developing the interview guide, therefore, it was ensured that questions were open-ended, and the structure was flexible enough to allow scope for the participant to raise unanticipated issues. As a result, the interviews were more collaborative and free-flowing, and a relationship of trust was built more readily between researcher and participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews were conducted in summer 2023. One was conducted face-to-face at the workplace of the participant; three via scheduled online meetings; and two asynchronously via email. The conversations were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researchers. Due to the responsive nature of the chosen data collection method, interviews ranged from approximately 20 minutes to 40 minutes in

length.

The study was approved through the [Anonymised university] ethics process. The voluntary and fully informed consent of participants was gained. Participants were told they could withdraw up until September 2023, should they wish to do so. For reasons of confidentiality the libraries involved are fully anonymised.

3.3. Analysis

The primary mode of analysis applied to the transcribed interview data was reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). As Braun and Clarke (2019) explain, RTA is a method which foregrounds "the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (p. 594). Furthermore, thematic analysis is highly versatile, in that it can be applied to a variety of research questions and data collection methods, making it a popular choice for qualitative research. RTA typically consists of six distinct stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, consolidating these codes into overarching themes, reviewing these potential themes and recoding data items where appropriate, defining and naming the finalized themes and lastly, producing the report.

During the data familiarization stage, the interview data was manually transcribed by the lead author. Whilst this process was relatively time consuming, it ultimately proved very useful in that it "greatly facilitated a deep immersion into the data" (Byrne, 2022: 1398). As RTA is, by nature, an iterative process, detailed reflective notes were kept throughout the analysis stage in order to track the development of themes. Data went through two cycles of coding (Denscombe, 2015) during which central organising

principles were identified and refined. Themes emerging from the coding process are fully explored in the findings below.

3.4. Limitations

All participating institutions were members of the Academic Libraries North consortium, and as such, it is possible that they have somewhat similar values and strategic priorities. But the sample did include institutions of different size and research intensity. It should also be stated that some of the institutions had previously shared their experiences of working on wellbeing initiatives with other members of the consortium.

4. Findings

A number of similarities between the participating institutions were noted by the during the analysis:

- All wellbeing collections had been established in the last five years.
- All institutions consider wellbeing collections as distinct from leisure reading collections.
- Each has collaborated with their student counselling service when developing or promoting the collection.
- All had an awareness and understanding of the Reading Well initiative.
- All ensured that the collection had a strong physical presence as well as a digital one.

Despite these similarities, the wellbeing collections also had significant differences (Table 2). They varied in size with the largest one containing 400 items (including digital content) and the smallest less than 100 (row c), with some being complemented by a separate, pre-existing

leisure reading collection. The type of content they contained was varied (row d). Whereas University C, for example, very much focused on CBT/ practical guides, the collection at library A focused more on popular self-help titles, celebrity biographies and uplifting fiction.

Table 2: Overview of the collections

	University A	**University B**	**University C**	**University D**	**University E**	**University F**
a.Context	Russell Group, very large, multiple libraries	Russell Group, very large, multiple libraries	Russell Group, very large, two main libraries	Pre-1992, large, two main libraries	Post-1992, very large, multiple libraries	Post-1992, medium, two main libraries
b.University / Library strategic plan	Aligned with #stepchange framework, mental health charter award	Library has specific wellbeing philosophy, member of mental health charter programme	Health and wellbeing plan launched in 2018, member of mental health charter programme	Student mental health strategy and action plan 2020-2023	Focus on creating positive culture, member of mental health charter programme	Student mental health and wellbeing strategy 2021-2026, institutional focus on student satisfaction
c.Wellbeing collection	Est. 2020, 67 items, separate leisure reading collection	Est. 2019, 286 physical items, 140 digital items, separate leisure reading collection	Est. 2019, 63 items, no leisure reading provision	Est. 2021, 107 items, separate leisure reading collection	Est. 2021, 286 items, separate leisure reading collection	Est. 2021, 188 items, separate leisure reading collection
d.Collection content	Focus on popular self-help titles, celebrity biographies, uplifting fiction.	Balanced number of popular self-help and CBT titles, also includes books on craft, finance and environmental sustainability	Strong emphasis on CBT/practical guides	Focus on CBT/practical guides and physical health; includes general self-care and healthy eating titles	Focus on CBT/practical guides; includes titles on writing for wellbeing	Primarily CBT/practical guides
e.Supply model	Purchased from existing library budget; original one-off funding linked to creation of wellbeing room; willing to buy any book recommended by staff/students.	Purchased using existing library budget; willing to buy any book recommended by staff/students.	One-off funding (£1,000) for initial project; additions purchased using existing library budget.	Limited budget for collection set-up/maintenance, drawn from wider leisure collection budget.	Purchased using existing library budget, counselling service pay for shelving; willing to buy any book recommended by staff/students/.	Limited budget (approx. £1,000); started by identifying relevant resources in wider collection; donations from local public library participating in 'Reading Well' scheme.
f.Location	Designated wellbeing room, ground floor of library; soft lighting, comfortable seating, sound insulation;	Designated area in 'link' space between two main libraries; natural light; soft seating; moveable shelves; wellbeing	Available at three libraries, one with seating available; designated shelving; additional online provision.	Designated student wellness room, created as part of library re-modelling; quiet, small kitchen area, soft seating, plants; additional	Split between two libraries, regularly rotated stock; next to leisure reading collection; comfortable seating; natural	Quiet area in main library with soft seating, information board, leaflets, jigsaws, and mindfulness activities;

	wellbeing information board; additional online provision.	information board; additional online provision.		online provision.	light; additional online provision.	additional online provision.
g.Key Partnerships	Disability and Dyslexia Support Service, student wellbeing service	Wider reading group, library wellbeing group, university wellbeing group	Reading Well, student wellbeing team, counselling service	Reading Well, university mental health and wellbeing working group, counselling service	Counselling and mental health team, student wellbeing team, money advice team, Reading Well	Reading Well, Academic Libraries North, public library, student counselling service
h.Promotion	Social media, digital displays, cross-promotional events with student wellbeing service	Social media, posters, QR codes, tied to wider wellbeing events	Distinctive branding, postcards, social media, digital displays, university wellbeing app	Signs and posters around library, tied to wider wellbeing events	Social media, posters, student blogs, reading / writing groups	Email, social media, distinctive spine stickers, student competitions, tied to wider wellbeing events
i. Current evaluation method/s	Library website feedback form; online chat service; no specific wellbeing collection feedback provision.	Usage stats occasionally checked; informal positive feedback from students/staff at wellbeing events; feedback link on Overdrive page for students.	Anonymous feedback postcards/boxes situated next to collection and in student wellbeing offices; informal feedback from therapists.	Link to feedback form at top of online reading list; small number of book suggestions; informal feedback from academic staff members.	Two external research projects are currently being conducted; no internal evaluation so far; intention to send out feedback forms in the future; students encouraged to write book reviews for bibliotherapy blog.	No formal evaluation, but students can feedback via general library query form online.

<u>Collection content</u>

The divergent character of the content of the wellbeing collections reflected that participants had varying conceptualisations of how reading could impact wellbeing. For one participant, the primary aim of their collection was to support students with specific mental health issues by providing practical, CBT-aligned resources:

> *"It was crucial for us that the books...had the trusted stamp of health professionals. We really wanted all the therapists on board..." (C)*

As such, many of the texts chosen by this institution were taken from the original Reading Well Books on Prescription list provided by The Reading Agency. Furthermore, this particular institution was the only participant not to include imaginative literature such as fiction or poetry in their collection. However, they did note that it has been suggested they broaden their remit:

> *"We're under pressure to include wider health and well[being] titles. Should it be restricted to recommended mental health titles and then have other collections within our service which provide other wellbeing books?" (C)*

For others, however, the Reading Well list was deemed too rigid:

> *"We started with the Books on Prescription, but these were very medical, and we wanted...a more holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing." (D)*

It seemed that the content is heavily determined by the personal or professional interests of those initially working on the project. Just as the participant from library C was keen to create a collection to address specific mental health issues, so the participant from A wanted a mood-lifting, fiction-heavy collection:

> *"...my idea was to have an uplifting collection…it could be toxic positivity in a way…But I think you can learn so much about yourself by reading fiction." (A)*

Other participants were less concerned about the precise content of the collection, and more interested in the idea of instilling in students the importance of taking time out from their studies:

> *"With the general wider reading as well as the wellbeing collection, just giving*

them some time out...We also promote, alongside all the wider reading stuff we promote our, we've got BFI player access, we've got Kanopy, like film resources, so we promote those alongside it as well" (B)

By encouraging students to take time out from their studies, it was argued that wellbeing collections were a way of addressing some of the underlying issues contributing to poor student mental health and wellbeing.

Partnership working

In choosing resources, most of the participants considered it important to seek professional guidance from university counselling, wellbeing and/or mental health services:

"As well as the counsellors and mental health team choosing the books, we also reached out to other support services in the university, like the wellbeing team, the money advice team, and just asked for suggestions." (E)

Indeed, for one participant, partnering with branches of their institution's student support team was considered a mutually beneficial arrangement:

"[Developing this collection has] strengthened relationships between library staff and the student wellbeing counselling team, both in terms of knowledge of what each service does, but also in terms of collaborations such as joint marketing endeavours" (C)

In forming collaborative partnerships such as this, it was observed that wellbeing collections have the capacity to act as a bridge, allowing students the autonomy to explore potentially beneficial resources, whilst also signposting them to more specific support services:

> *"It might just be the sort of thing where people who don't come and ask for help, but they might just go along and pick up some information..." (F)*

For some, having the input of mental health and wellbeing professionals added legitimacy to the resources offered. Furthermore, having a wellbeing display and browsable resources in an area with high student footfall such as the library might go some way towards reducing stigmas around mental health, as well as creating a broader awareness of support services available:

> *"Anything that helps dispel stigmas around wellbeing [and] mental health is positive...having a display which is always there, it's not like a seasonal thing." (F)*

> *"I quoted some usage statistics but I also...believe that just having the service there, whether it's used or not, it's a positive that students can see it...They'll see it and they'll know that it's there if they need it." (B).*

Working with student support services to develop and promote the collection was also seen to demonstrate the library service's alignment with the strategic priorities of their parent institution. Four of the six participating institutions are members of the University Mental Health Charter Programme developed by Student Minds in 2019, and all participants have established their own student wellbeing strategic plan tailored

to the particular needs of their institution. By combining their professional knowledge of effective collection development and understanding of how to engage with students, with the expertise of their student support service colleagues, academic library staff were able to demonstrate to senior anagement the role they have to play in working towards the wider strategic goals of the university. As two participants astutely observe, not only does this allow students access to a broader range of services, but also can be used by the library service as a useful bargaining chip when negotiating for a larger budget:

> *"...fitting in with the wider objectives of the university means that they're happy to promote it... If you can find someone higher up who will buy into the concept that's really handy, because...they've never questioned the budget or any kind of things like that." (B)*

> *"A lot of what we've done works on that basis, to show we are linked into these bigger agendas, we have a role to play, we're doing what we can, we'd love to do more…can you give us more money?" (F)*

In most cases, students were the target users of these resources, it might be expected that they would be involved at the development stage. This was true of only two of the participating universities, one of whom strongly advocated for full co-production:

> *"The important thing...is to work with students on it, so it's not that librarians have decided that's what we think is good for wellbeing...I think it's important to make sure we are representing lots of different student voices" (A)*

Whilst another sought resource recommendations from students prior to officially launching

the collection:

> *"We did an online form which we circulated by email and by social media to get students to make suggestions of titles they'd like to see." (F)*

The limited contribution of students from the participating universities, in developing these collections, might be attributed to a number of factors. For one institution, there was a perceived reluctance on the part of students to fully engage with the initiative:

> *"I think it's difficult to get them involved... You need the free stuff to get them engaged, I find." (B)*

As well as internal collaborations, the wellbeing collections involved external collaborations. As will be discussed, demonstrating to management the value or return on investment of wellbeing initiatives can be problematic, and for institutions with less funding, establishing partnerships with external organisations was seen as fruitful:

> *"It was something that...the library needed to be doing more on, although a challenge for us is budget – we don't have much [laughs]. We do not have much at all! Though we got some donations, actually, from the public library, due to the Reading Well initiative" (F)*

Whilst there is some evidence that schemes involving universities working with public libraries can be successful in terms of the shared leasing of leisure reading material (see Palmer, 2018), only one participant of this study has pursued this option. One collaborative practice shared by all participants, however, is that of sharing their knowledge and experiences with other academic institutions. This is achieved through a number of methods, some of which are more formal than others. One participant

mentioned using the internet to gather inspiration for potential resources:

> *"I just researched other universities, there were a few good websites at the time that recommended bibliotherapy books" (E)*

Whilst others organised tours of their wellbeing space, or hosted online events focused on exploring library facilitated activities aimed at supporting student wellbeing:

> *"We had quite a lot of institutions come and look at this room because they were wanting to do a similar thing, so I think ...we've been quite ahead with that." (A)*

> *"We put together the programme and there were talks from various other unis...so we knew what other places were doing, and a lot of it was around collections" (F)*

This type of inter-institutionalcollaboration could prove beneficialin several ways. For example, universities with well-established collections have the ability to share which titles have been most popular:

> *"The ones that stood out are ones that have been just general publishing sensations really. In terms of wellbeing, 'Atomic Habits', I notice that's been out 56 times, and the e-book and the audiobook have been out 16 times" (B)*

Location

Finding an appropriate location in which to house the collection was an important consideration for all of the participants. In some cases, funding had been allocated specifically for the purpose of creating a wellbeing space:

"We'd been given some money to develop something in the library that was like a relaxation and wellbeing space for students, so we commandeered this area, and decided we'd use this space as like a relaxation and wellbeing room." (A)

"...an old office and staff room were renovated into a new student 'Wellness Room' [and] we realised this would be a great space to host our collection" (D)

Whilst others had to identify which of their existing library spaces might be most suitable to house the collection:

"This is quite a peaceful area, so it works quite well. It's just whether you can identify an area in your library that's peaceful enough to set up a wellbeing place" (B)

The notion of providing a peaceful space for students, in which relaxation and wellbeing are prioritised over coursework, was seen as particularly important for one participant:

"This room was developed as a space for students to escape the noise and bustle of campus, and come for some quiet reflection...It's no good having these resources available in a place that isn't particularly conducive to mental health and wellbeing...The collection should be, if possible, in a quiet, secluded place, where people are able to browse privately and free of judgement" (D)

Balancing the need for quiet areas in which boundaries are respected, with making sure that the user base was aware of the resources available was perceived as a dilemma. Certainly, the physicality of these collections was considered important by many in that physical resources ensure that students are given a break from online reading:

"It's something for people to take a break from their studies...overwhelmingly a lot of the reading is online nowadays so we felt like it would be nice to try and get print for the collection, and that would help to make it very visual." (F)

Promotion

One factor influencing the use of wellbeing collections, upon which all participants agreed, was effective promotion. As one participant remarked, when asked about the apparent success of their collection:

"It's all in the publicity and how much time you spend doing that." (B)

What is particularly striking about each of the participants is the broad range of methods by which their collections are promoted:

"[We] decided to harness the power of our partners across the university...we created postcards which were distributed to the chaplains, the wellbeing team, the student union advisory centre (as well as many more strategic locations) and utilised campus and library plasma screens, social media, blogs, academic staff updates...We created a dedicated webpage and used this URL in our promotion as well." (C)

Not only did participants use interdepartmental partnerships and social media to deliver their promotional materials more widely, but they also promoted their collection as part of broader mental health and wellbeing events held on campus:

"We also promote the collection alongside many mental health & wellbeing awareness days/events that are highlighted by the main student comms

calendar." (D)

Using incentives in order to encourage students to engage with the collection and make recommendations was also found to be common practice amongst participants:

> *"Students...submit[ted] suggestions via little slips in a box...[and] some of the winning suggestions [had] a book token or something like that." (F1)*

Evaluation

An important theme in the data was the perceived difficulty of quantifying how often the collection is being used, and the extent of its efficacy. As one contributor asked:

> *"A lot of the university library initiatives like this are very well-meaning, you know, they're very positive, but what impact are they actually having?" (F)*

Various methods of evaluation had been attempted by participants. Looking at issue statistics was an obvious approach:

> *"Looking at the list, nearly everything seemed to go out, so everything is being used, some more than others, but our students do engage with it. I think it's fairly successful" (B)*

As one participant explained, even where such statistics are available, there can be technical difficulties in attempting to track usage across both physical and digital collections. In particular, the anonymous nature of the data collected from digital collections made it difficult to determine the demographics of users:

> *"I think it's difficult because with OverDrive [digital collection software] you don't get any...all the users are anonymised and kind of administrated through*

their university log-in, we can't see what type of user is using it. It would be nice if we could have like an undergrad, a postgrad [and] staff categories and see who's using it the most." (B)

In terms of acquiring specific feedback from students regarding the relevance and quality of the resources offered, the most common form of data collection technique among the participants was questionnaires. Having used this method in partnership with their student wellbeing team, one participant found students to be relatively responsive:

"We created feedback postcards...which sat alongside the collection, as well as in student wellbeing offices...Students using the collections were giving positive anonymous feedback...and therapists confirmed this in the encouraging verbal feedback they were receiving through consultations." (C)

Further to this, the same participant was looking at other ways in which their student wellbeing offices might aid librarians in building a more substantive evidence base:

"Therapists are looking at ways of recording referrals as part of their usual work system." (C)

For other participants, however, feedback was gathered on a more ad hoc basis. Some make use of wider events as an opportunity to canvas the opinions of students:

"We have 'Coffee and Chat', so we'll have an event where we'll get big vats of coffee and tea and loads of biscuits and stuff, and then we'll kind of stand around beckoning students over." (B)

Others relied more on informal verbal feedback shared with them during wellbeing

related group sessions:

> *"The people who attend, and the people who read the books seem to really appreciate the initiative, which is good." (E)*

The time which it took for staff to collect data for evaluation purposes could also prove to be a problem, particularly when there were limited staff resources to begin with:

> *"We don't always follow up and evaluate things as well as we could...we're a bit like, 'ok, we really need to understand that better'... but in total we have fourteen staff in the library...We're still trying to do all the same sorts of things that a bigger Uni is trying to do...so a lot of the time we do things and hope for the best and go 'yeah, that seems to be working…we'll come back to it at some point and we'll properly evaluate it'." (F)*

Perceived role of academic libraries / librarians in wellbeing

Partly linked to the issues around evaluation, the extent to which supporting student wellbeing is considered a core service of academic libraries remained debated. As one participant noted, there tends to be a certain amount of friction with colleagues regarding the amount of time and space used for wellbeing initiatives:

> *"Occasionally we'll get a little bit of friction over...people spending too much time doing this, away from their normal duties, but it's getting people to see its part of the library service." (B)*

However, another participant argued that, as students tend to descend upon libraries at times of peak stress, librarians are well-placed to spot distressed individuals,

particularly now that 24/7 opening hours are more common:

> *"Sometimes we're the only place that's open late, or at weekends…We do notice if students are struggling...and we do try to have a chat with them about it... Some people might argue - 'what has an academic library got to do with wellbeing anyway?', and I would argue that it has quite a lot." (A)*

One thing that all participants of the study made clear, however, was that libraries and the resources they hold are not intended to act as a substitute for student support services, and that the majority of library staff will never be trained to respond to or advise on student mental health crises:

> *"We've been very clear that we are not experts on wellbeing and mental health...we're librarians, that's our role, its literally to identify useful resources...We are not the core area of support on this, but we recognise it's really important and we've got resources that may help students" (F)*

Indeed, wellbeing provision in academic libraries was seen as less about filling the gaps of underfunded and overwhelmed student support services, and more about using the professional knowledge and skills librarians had to make a positive difference:

> *"A wellbeing collection isn't going to prevent serious mental problems, but...if somebody gets the right book at the right time at the start of a spiral. [Essentially] you've got to try and have an impact and that's a way we can do it as libraries." (B)*

5. Discussion

This study has established a picture of the nature and organisation of wellbeing collections in a sample of UK academic libraries. They have mostly been established recently, in the period 2019-22. They vary in size, sometimes being purely physical collections and sometimes containing digital elements. All have their own space and promotion is seen as a key priority.

A striking feature of the wellbeing collections studied is that their content was quite divergent, reflecting diverse understandings of 'wellbeing' and the library's role in it. Indeed, as Forgeard et al (2011) note, centuries of attempting to define the notion of living well has "has given rise to blurred and overly broad definitions of wellbeing" (p. 81). The ill-defined nature of wellbeing manifests in the broad, and occasionally surprising range of resources included in participant's collections. Texts range from mental health diagnosis textbooks to practical advice on soapmaking; from Greta Thunberg to interpretive dance. In their article surveying the range of wellbeing events held by academic libraries, Cox and Brewster (2020a) comment that the institutions concerned "fail to convincingly define the core concept of wellbeing that the activities they are organising are trying to address" (p. 3). It is perhaps surprising that, despite all belonging to the same academic library consortium, the resources contained under the same heading of 'wellbeing collection' at each participating institution differed so greatly. Yet, as seen in the literature review, this same ambiguity exists across the bibliotherapy literature.

Library services participating in this research project have successfully established collaborative partnerships with branches of their student support services team in order to develop and promote their wellbeing collection. This also reflects the need to align

to wider strategies. However, the data shows that only one participant fully engaged with students when working towards selecting potential resources. There were barriers in terms of student responsiveness and staff resources to create such partnerships. A guide produced by Student Minds (2019b) argues that "people with experience of being current students, both with and without the experience of mental illness, should be part of every stage of developing mental health and wellbeing strategies, including commissioning, planning, delivery and evaluation" (p. 16). This view is supported by the Student Mental Health Research Network (2023), who note that whilst conducting their work, "across all projects, researchers saw tremendous benefits to a co-creative approach with students. Not only did this help to develop more robust and relevant projects, but students also responded positively to the collaborative experiences and group working." (Smarten, 2023).

Approaches to evaluation were rather weak and discontinuous, generally reflecting limited resources. But it also reflects the ambiguous definition of wellbeing and the difficulty of truly measuring impacts on it. It remains an issue that the impact of wellbeing initiatives are hard to evidence.

The extent to which supporting student wellbeing is a core role of academic libraries remains the topic of debate. Whilst the participants of this study were clear about their lack of medical expertise in terms of responding to urgent student mental health crises, they were nevertheless advocates of academic librarians using their professional knowledge and resources to work to improve student wellbeing. However, it was reported that other members of the library staff were less keen on using resources to host wellbeing initiatives instead of directing students to more obviously relevant

services. Research conducted by Cox and Brewster (2023) concerning the role of academic libraries in supporting student wellbeing elicited similarly diverse opinions, in that "some participants saw supporting mental health and wellbeing as a core activity, while others confined their role to signposting to other services" (p.8). There might be a number of reasons why these contrasting opinions persist. For example, the extent to which the legal duty of care for students lies with their academic institution remains a thorny issue. In a recent briefing by UUK (2023), responding to a petition calling for a legal statutory duty of care for students in higher education, it was questioned "whether a compliance- led approach will drive the cultural changes needed to promote awareness and disclosure, open conversations and co-production – all of which are needed to act on prevention and early intervention" (p. 6).

6. Conclusion

This is one of the first studies to examine the nature of academic library wellbeing collections in the UK. It has formed a picture of when they were founded, what they contain and how they are promoted. It has revealed the diverse conceptions of wellbeing they reflect. It has shown the strength of internal and external collaborations in shaping the collections. But it has also revealed the difficulties in engaging with students themselves in this process. It has explored the challenges of evaluating the collections, in the context of the wider need to justify wellbeing services in the academic library context.

It seems that we are in early days with the creation of wellbeing collections in academic libraries. The current findings reveal some good practices such as close collaboration with counselling or wellbeing services, and intensive practices of promotion. There

remain areas where more work could be done. Building partnerships with students appears to be challenging. While resources are stretched, more rigorous longitudinal studies of usage would assist in defining the appropriate scope of collections and helping to justify the resource demanded.

Much of the research into wellbeing resources in UK academic libraries has been focused on the creation/curation of the collection. Thus far, however, there has been little data gathered on the use of these collections. Due to the time of year during which data was collected for this study, as well as its limited time frame, it was not possible to conduct a qualitative study into how, why, and when students make use of wellbeing collections. It would be beneficial, therefore, if future research projects were to bring forward the voices of those using wellbeing collections. It would also be interesting to conduct a study comparing the attitudes of international students and home students to academic library wellbeing initiatives, especially given the different levels of stigma attached to mental health issues internationally.

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