

IAU SDG 3 Cluster

Catalysing collaboration for an integrated approach to health, in support of equity and wellbeing worldwide



Follow up and summary report: Exploring soft skills and inner capacities for resilience, health and wellbeing



Ensure healthy
lives and promote
well-being for
all at all ages

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Executive Summary

In the wake of global upheavals—from the COVID-19 pandemic to ecological and technological transitions—higher education institutions are being called upon to do more than transmit knowledge. They are being asked **to prepare students, staff, and societies for the challenges of a complex, uncertain world**. Central to this emerging responsibility is the **cultivation of soft skills and capacities that support resilience, health, and wellbeing**.

The report situates its inquiry within the intersecting crises that define our time: climate change, geopolitical instability, rising mental health concerns, and the rapid evolution of digital technologies. In this context, Sustainable Development Goal - Good Health and Wellbeing, is understood not simply as the absence of disease, but as the presence of mental, emotional, and social wellbeing. **Since the COVID19 pandemic, the IAU SDG3 Cluster has been exploring how universities are responding to these realities.** See [2024 Insight Report](#).

An evolving understanding of mental health and resilience has also inspired **a paradigm shift beyond individually focused frameworks and approaches**, recognizing the **crucial roles of contextual factors, the collective experience, and social networks**. The concept of resilience has moved beyond the domain of personal coping, appreciating that individuals do not live in a vacuum while at the same time considering individual differences and the need for person-centred approaches. Though not a specific focus of this report, an emerging systemic view of mental health was reflected in the examples, challenges and ways forward presented and discussed.

This follow up report aims to **look more specifically at soft skills and inner capacities for resilience, health and wellbeing**. It **adopts an inclusive definition** that spans cognitive, emotional, social, and meaning-making domains such as critical thinking, empathy, presence, self-awareness, ethical reflection, and systems thinking to maintain a broad lens of inquiry.

While the momentum around soft skills is growing, persistent challenges exist. **Lack of a common language, disciplinary silos, conceptual fuzziness, epistemological differences and undervaluing of 'non-technical' skills, are some of the identified challenges.** Additionally, inner capacities, often subtle and intangible, take time to build and can be difficult to measure, making them less likely to be prioritized in policy and resource allocation. Furthermore, ethical, contextual and cultural considerations must be carefully considered.

The report provides examples of **how universities are weaving soft skills and inner capacities into their offerings in diverse and creative ways including continuing education, curricular integration, pedagogical innovation, community engagement and cultural and creative initiatives**. And it highlights the need for additional **research, cross-disciplinary and systemic approaches and dialogue to further this exploration**.

Introduction

Global context

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic instability together with the ecological and technological transitions and an accelerated pace of change have led to an increase in the visibility and prevalence of mental health challenges around the world. The current context only adds urgency to the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), more specifically Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, which offers a more holistic vision of health extending beyond disease prevention and treatment to encompass mental, emotional, and social wellbeing (UN, 2015), and also to the IPCC report's (2023) call for increased attention to the human aspects and systemic considerations of transition.

Given this context and the rising concern for mental health in higher education, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IAU SDG 3 cluster¹ has been exploring progress on mental health in members' institutions, at the research, institutional and teaching levels – for equity, health and wellbeing worldwide.

SDG 3 cluster exploration

- In 2020, the UOC and the cluster collaborated with the IAU on a joint webinar, entitled "[Higher education under examination: are we ready to train the future healthcare workforce?](#)" summarized in the "Rethinking healthcare workforce education" paper in the [December 2021 issue of IAU Horizons](#) and in "[Lessons from the pandemic to educate future healthcare professionals](#)", linking SDG 3 and SDG 4. This webinar made the necessity of incorporating soft skills in the curriculum of medical schools very clear.
- In 2022, the cluster explored the link between SDG 3 and SDG 5 in its joint webinar "[Exploring the nexus between health, equity, and gender](#)". Please see the [infographic](#) summarizing the key learnings of the webinar here and the [associated news story](#).
- In March 2023, the cluster held its first face-to-face three-day workshop entitled "Catalysing collaboration for an integrated approach to health, in support of equity and wellbeing worldwide" and released a [whitepaper](#) summarizing the learnings and other related outputs: see the [video](#), [photo gallery](#), and [knowledge capsules](#). In that workshop and subsequent meetings, the members agreed to focus their efforts on mental health and building skills for resilience, recognizing that since the COVID-19 pandemic, it had become an increasingly relevant topic for all institutions. (Linked to SDG 4 target 4.7² and SDG 3 targets 3.4 and 3.5³)

¹ The [IAU SDG3 cluster for Health & Wellbeing](#). Universities for Good Health, which was launched in 2018, is a network of seven higher education institutions across five continents, including [Western Sydney University](#) (Australia), [Makerere University](#) (Uganda), [Universidad de Caldas](#) (Colombia), [Universitas Gadjah Mada](#) (Indonesia), [Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana](#) (Mexico), [University College Dublin](#) (Ireland) and [Universitat Oberta de Catalunya \(UOC\)](#) (Spain). It is spearheaded by the UOC's eHealth Center in Barcelona and forms part of the Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) hosted by the [International Association of Universities](#).

² Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

³ Target 3.4: By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being; Target 3.5: Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol.

- In October 2023, the SDG 3 cluster kicked off its knowledge-sharing series with an online seminar entitled "The mental health crisis, building resilience in a changing world". See the 2023 [webinar recording](#) and [write-up](#). The UOC also published an interview in 2023 in which the cluster lead shared some [lessons learned](#) from the past few years of the cluster's work and the cluster's intentions for the future.
- In early 2024, the cluster secretariat launched an internal survey and a series of one-on-one calls with member institutions and the IAU to better understand members' engagement with mental health at the institutional, teaching and research levels. A group call was subsequently set up to share preliminary findings. A deeper dive into each institution was then developed, based on the initial data and additional website consultations. Two [webinars](#) were also held on [1 October](#) and [3 October](#) with members to explore the topic. (See the [write-up](#).) Read the [summary of 2024 activities](#) for further information. Also see summary article in [IAU Horizons](#).
- Further benchmarking and additional follow-up conversations were held in April-May 2025 with SDG 3 cluster members to update on progress.

This report is a **follow up** on the [summary of 2024 activities](#), with the aim of providing a deeper dive on ways in which skills and capacities for resilience, health and wellbeing are being explored both within and outside the cluster membership, and across sectors.

Visit:

[Universities 4 Good Health](#)

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Aim

Taking an interdisciplinary lens, threads emerging from cluster conversations, analysis and practical examples from IAU SDG 3 cluster members and beyond, this report aims to explore emerging themes, good practice and challenges in integrating soft skills and inner capacities for resilience for health and wellbeing in higher education institutions while also considering the wider global context in which it is embedded.

Structure

The report is structured as follows. First, it outlines the current global context from an SDG perspective, highlighting the accelerating complexity and interconnected crises that are shaping the current landscape. It then explores the rising awareness of mental health and mental health challenges since COVID-19, and the shift towards a more contextual and collective understanding of health and wellbeing. It then highlights the pressing need to equip individuals and institutions with the skills and capacities needed to navigate complexity for resilience, health and wellbeing. Finally, it looks at emerging good practice from the IAU SDG 3 cluster members and beyond, along with some of the challenges that still need to be overcome.

Context

An increasingly complex environment

Following the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, provide a global framework for addressing development challenges through an integrated approach. Comprising 17 goals and 169 targets, they reflect a collective ambition to eliminate poverty, promote peace, protect the planet, and enhance wellbeing (UN, 2015). Despite informing this process through their research, higher education institutions (HEIs) were initially not recognized as key players in bringing forward the SDGs in education and research. However, in the past 10 years HEIs have made significant progress embedding SDGs in teaching and learning, research, community engagement, campus operations, and more (see also [IAU HESD](#)).

Since the creation of the SDGs, the convergence and acceleration of often interdependent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, climate change, economic disruption and rapid technological changes, have painted an increasingly complex, uncertain and volatile landscape. This has only made the need to support individuals, collectives and institutions in building the capacity to navigate change and complexity more tangible and pressing.

Growing awareness of mental health challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a transformational moment for global awareness on mental health which has led to greater attention on integration, prevention, and equity in health systems and in supporting mental health. Examples have included efforts to embed mental health into primary care, expanding digital mental health services, and engaging communities and patient groups in co-designing patient-centred and culturally relevant interventions.

At the same time, the current context has led to increased mental distress. Trends showing increasing burn out in care-related professions, a growing wave of anxiety, depression, and existential unease among the young, post-traumatic stress-related challenges in communities affected by climate emergencies or violent conflict are just some of the symptoms that have come to the surface.

What emerges is a mixed picture: a complex and rapidly changing context, rising awareness and levels of psychological distress, together with global efforts to promote health, equity, and sustainability. This tension highlights the need for approaches that consider mental health within broader efforts, fostering resilience and sustainable systemic change.

In higher education

In higher education more specifically, the combined effects of the pandemic, rapidly emerging technological changes and the overnight shift to online and blended models of learning have permanently changed the landscape. And although the pace of change has been accelerated by and during the pandemic, higher education is in a process of transformation, adding to the pressure on staff and students.

Since the pandemic, SDG 3 cluster members have all conducted some form of systematic research to gain a better understanding of the challenges, burdens and specific needs of their research, teaching, administrative staff and students. And as result, they have developed or enhanced their policies and programmes to support mental health. See the [2024 IAU SDG 3 Cluster Insight Report](#) and the [webinars](#) held on [1 October](#) and [3 October](#) 2024 for additional information.

A growing appreciation of the individual, the collective and the context

An evolving understanding of mental health and resilience has also inspired a mindset shift beyond individually focused frameworks and approaches, recognizing the crucial roles of contextual factors, the collective experience, and social networks. The concept of resilience has moved beyond the domain of personal coping, appreciating that individuals do not live in a vacuum while at the same time considering individual differences and the need for person-centred approaches.

At universities, mental health and wellbeing initiatives are increasingly going beyond psychological services. Universities are developing more comprehensive strategies, including prevention, focusing on creating supportive environments, and early identification and detection of potential situations of risk. Some examples include:

- Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) has launched "Health Promoting University", a transdisciplinary initiative to promote staff and students' mental and physical health and wellbeing. This has included a wide array of actions, with examples including a focus on physical spaces and the built environment that promotes green spaces and natural light and encouraging healthy lifestyle choices by becoming an alcohol- and smoke-free campus and introducing more nutritional food in its cafeterias and catering services. In line with this commitment, UGM has also implemented specific mental health programs, which include the publication of a guidebook for handling suicidal tendencies, the launch of the Lintang chatbox platform that allows students to consult mental health experts while maintaining their privacy, and the dissemination of several hotline leaflets for reporting cases of mental health issues, physical violence, and bullying.
- Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Western Sydney University (WSU) and Universidad de Caldas (UdC) have put in place systems to identify and follow up with students at risk of not completing their degrees.
- UdC offers targeted financial and employment support to students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or in situations of vulnerability.
- Several members also cited the relevance of considering workload and work-life balance as an element of the resilience and health and wellbeing conversation.
- And during the pandemic, universities provided additional support to students in situations of higher risk or vulnerability. WSU, for example, offered a student assistance fund to provide urgent financial relief to students facing hardship and a peer-to-peer support programme to help students "stay connected, motivated and academically on track."

Though not a specific focus of this report, an emerging systemic view of mental health was reflected in the examples, challenges and ways forward presented and discussed by the SDG 3 cluster members.

Framing soft skills and capacities

For the purposes of this report, the term "soft skills and inner capacities" is used as a comprehensive, integrative concept encompassing skills, competencies, inner capabilities and mindset, including dimensions related to cognition, emotions, social interaction, and deeper meaning-making.

Though soft skills and external behaviours have been the focus of traditional leadership training, inner capacities such as self-awareness, presence, purpose, ethics and mindset are increasingly being included in transformational leadership frameworks and systems thinking as fundamental pillars underpinning behaviour and sustainable behaviour change.

International frameworks such as the OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019), UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative (UNESCO, 2021), the EU's GreenComp: the European sustainability competence framework developed to support the European Green Deal (Bianchi et al., 2022), UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Roadmap (UNESCO, 2020), UNICEF's Global Framework on Transferable Skills (UNICEF, 2019), and the emerging and evolving Inner Development Goals (IDG) Framework (Inner Development Goals, 2021) all point to a combination of cognitive, emotional, social, and meaning-making skills and inner capacities that can support systems thinking and navigating change and complexity. They are also embedded in the concept of transformational leadership, as a dynamic polarity between inner capacities and outer skills and behaviours, tending to the individual and the collective, operating in a specific context and within larger systems.

The link to health and wellbeing

In recent years, there has been a shift towards a more integrated understanding of mental health, embedded in the concept of "health and wellbeing". Increased consideration of soft skills and inner capacities is one aspect of that shift.

Soft skills and inner capacities can enable individuals to engage with complexity more skilfully and purposefully in support of equity, resilience, health and wellbeing. For example, soft skills such as effective communication, conflict management, the ability to work with others and adaptability can all contribute to developing better relationships. Better relationships can foster a sense of belonging which has been linked to increased resilience and wellbeing. Inner capacities such as self-awareness, presence, purpose, and compassion can provide strong foundations and help cultivate a sense of agency and care. And sense-making abilities such as perspective-taking and critical thinking can help students better assess, understand and act more intentionally in unfamiliar situations.

Researchers in sustainability sciences are increasingly highlighting the need for an increased focus on the human aspects of transition and change to support the achievement of the SDGs more widely, bringing together many already existing threads of emerging and established research and practice (see the systematic review by Wamsler et al., 2021). Emerging research on the cultivation of compassion, for example, points to its links with a sense of agency, and its potential to act as a protective factor against burn-out in care-related professions requiring high levels of empathetic attunement (Germer & Neff, 2013; Raab, 2014; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). And research coming from the neurosciences is lending further empirical support linking soft skills and inner capacities to health and wellbeing, reinforcing findings already established in other domains of research and traditions. Research on mindfulness, for example, has pointed to its links with reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression and psychological distress and is supported by growing, although still emerging, evidence from neuroscience and longitudinal studies (Galante et al., 2023; Goldberg et al., 2018; Hölzel et al., 2011; Khoury et al., 2015).

The development of soft skills and inner capacities can also contribute to personal growth and human flourishing. Interesting initiatives are arising, combining insights from across the humanities and health sciences. In this direction, the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science, for example, is exploring how to "study and promote human flourishing, and to develop systematic approaches to the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines."

Educational and youth-focused programmes are also experimenting with holistic models incorporating emotional literacy, mindfulness, trauma-informed pedagogy, and social-emotional learning. These interventions often include the participation of families, teachers, and communities, reflecting the broader ecosystem that shapes wellbeing. Emory University's Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning (SEE Learning) programme, for example, has created educational programmes for schools and higher education institutions incorporating social, emotional and ethical aspects of learning and development and has been rolled out in different countries.

Case studies and examples from the SDG 3 cluster members

In higher education, soft skills and inner capacities have traditionally been taught in applied psychology, management or leadership courses. They are, however, increasingly being introduced into courses of other disciplines or through institutional activities. Within the SDG 3 cluster members' institutions, they are being integrated in a wide range of ways.

Some have been included as core transdisciplinary competencies and skills in the curriculum:

- At WSU, for example, fundamental capacities such as critical, reflective, and creative thinking skills, and systems and complexity thinking have been included in the core curriculum. This was developed through the university's SDG competency work aimed at preparing graduates to become active contributors to a sustainable, diverse, and socially just world. Institutionally, there is also an integrated mental health strategy.
- At the UOC, selected competencies have been included as cross-disciplinary competencies (as part of "ethical commitment and gender perspective") or as competencies related to ethics and critical thinking (as part of "use of technology").
- At Makerere University selected soft skills, such as critical thinking and collaboration skills have been included in the curriculum, also in response to employer demand and feedback.

Or through courses delivered in continuing education, promoting lifelong learning. Some examples include:

- The UOC offers leadership skills training in change management, creativity, emotional intelligence, effective communication, conflict resolution and leadership and team management as part of its continuing education options.
- Universidad de Caldas offers a diploma in mental health aimed at primary health care professionals.
- University College Dublin (UCD) offers Professional Academy Diplomas, which are short, intensive courses designed to upskill professionals in specific areas and include soft skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving.

Through workshops delivered through career centres and counselling services:

- The UCD Careers Network, for example, offers multiple programmes and workshops aimed at building essential soft skills. These include the "Skills for Working Life" programme, which focuses on leadership, commercial awareness, communication, and emotional intelligence. Its student counselling services offer group counselling and workshops on topics such as stress management, mindfulness, and bereavement support.

And/or integrated through pedagogical approaches that encourage student-centred and experiential learning, combining theory, practice and reflection:

- At WSU, pedagogical approaches, such as learner-centred, experience and problem-based learning, co-created and cross-sector work, support students in cultivating soft skills, together with inner qualities like resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Additionally, skills such as conceptual design, effective brainstorming, pitching, innovation, collaboration, and SDG awareness underpin their entrepreneurship training and development programme, "Venture Makers".
- The UOC, created as an online university to cater to a broad-based student body often combining other professional and family commitments has student-led and flexible learning as fundamental pillars of its educational model.

Going beyond classroom learning through integrated and meaningful community engagement and service.

- In Indonesia, [community service](#) is a mandatory part of the higher education curriculum. At UGM, students are sent to live in local rural communities to develop projects combining education, research and community services in support of the SDGs. This gives them real-life problem-solving experience and communication skills and enables them to work in multidisciplinary teams.
- Community-based education research and services in rural areas are also a compulsory part of the health professions' curriculum at Makerere University, enabling medical students to work in the health facilities of nearby villages (see qualitative evaluation of the programme [here](#) and more specifically on Malaria interventions [here](#)).
- Makerere University has a multi-disciplinary "One Health Field Attachment" programme where students from different health disciplines (such as environmental health, nursing and veterinary medicine) come together and are attached to different community sites. With the community, they conduct a needs analysis and co-develop simple and implementable solutions over a 4-to-6-week period, aimed at improving both health and community.
- Universidad de Caldas has included the "ABC of Good Life" module and health literacy in its community-based research work.

Through multidisciplinary initiatives bridging health, humanities and culture:

- The UOC has created a vice-rectorate for Alliances, Community and Culture with activities spanning the culture, community and health and wellbeing space.
- WSU offers a "Creativity and Cultural Wellbeing for Communities" course emphasizing the importance of lived wellbeing and creative responses to social issues fostering a deeper connection to community and global citizenship.

- WSU has also created a [World Leisure Centre of Excellence](#), an interdisciplinary hub contributing to creating thriving, inclusive, and resilient communities in which all members enjoy their human right to leisure.

And through student exchanges and extra-curricular activities:

- University of Caldas actively foments extra-curricular activities such as sports teams recognizing their value in fostering a sense of belonging and work-life balance.
- UCD has created the "UCD Advantage Award" to encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities.

The examples above – introducing cross-cutting competencies, incorporating pedagogical approaches that foment student-centred and experiential learning, offering broad-based psychological skills training and actively fomenting extra-curricular activities and community engagement – help illustrate all the different ways in which universities can weave in the development, practice and nurturing of soft skills and inner capacities in their institutions, given their specific context. However, for a fully integrated systemic effort, some barriers still need to be overcome.

Challenges and tensions in implementation

Building a common understanding and language around what is meant by soft skills, inner capacities, and resilience is important. Conceptual fuzziness and epistemological differences between disciplines remain a challenge. There is a strong need for a cross-disciplinary and systemic approach and dialogue for building that understanding. The various regional and multilateral international frameworks and the cross-sector Inner Development Goals (IDGs) movement are encouraging steps in that direction.

Soft skills and inner capacities are still undervalued as compared to technical skills. And in some cases, the case still needs to be made to governing bodies for their inclusion in already fully loaded curriculums. Some of the more intangible and less observable "being" or inner capacities like self-awareness or empathy are difficult to measure and therefore less likely to be considered.

Furthermore, any effort to include inner development must be carefully designed to ensure that it is culturally, psychologically and ethically grounded, person-centric and voluntary. This requires resources and care.

Finally, building some of these skills and especially inner capacities takes time and needs to be nurtured over time. Visible progress may be difficult to appreciate in the short term.

Discussion

Working through the challenges presented above requires dialogue across disciplines including the health sciences and humanities to capitalize on the breadth and depth of knowledge universities bring to the table. Conversations should also draw from traditions outside of academia, and grass-root experiences that have been developing in the last decades.

Cross disciplinary, inter-university and cross-sector dialogues necessary for meaningful integration of the soft skills and inner capacities take time. Discussions require well-facilitated processes to ensure that different voices are heard and valued and that power and sector dynamics are carefully considered. At the same time, the imperative is pressing. This presents a paradox that universities must navigate.

Learning from existing experience in universities and emerging practice on the ground can provide valuable learning. Higher education networks like the IAU, and cross-sector movements like the IDGs help facilitate dialogue across universities and sectors and bring together knowledge and lived experience and contextualized examples from around the world. Artificial intelligence tools can also help support the process.

Finally, adopting a holistic perspective on the soft skills and inner capacity for health and wellbeing can help challenge the perception that they simply "add to an already full curriculum." Rather than adding more, it may be about rethinking educational processes and recognizing the wide array of the learning opportunities that are available both inside and outside the classroom. This mindset shift views life itself as a classroom for lifelong learning.

Conclusion

There appears to be increasing convergence, among disciplines and traditions, that "soft skills" and inner capacities, such as critical thinking, cultural awareness, perspective-taking, creativity, adaptability, presence, empathy, compassion, and resilience, are vital as we continue to navigate an increasingly complex environment and can contribute to health and wellbeing and the SDGs more widely. As many commentators have noted, the so-called "soft skills" have perhaps not been given sufficient attention and may not be so "soft" after all.

Some of these skills and capacities are already being taught in certain disciplines or included as transdisciplinary competencies and skills in the curriculum. They are also increasingly being developed or nurtured through experiential activities such as student-led and case-study learning or entrepreneurship, extracurricular activities and community outreach. As illustrated in this report, many exciting initiatives are being piloted, implemented and rolled out in this direction.

Further research needs to be conducted to build a deeper and common understanding of the interlinkages between soft skills and inner capacities, health and wellbeing, and to the SDGs more widely. With the breadth of depth of knowledge that it generates, higher education can play an important role in furthering knowledge and in helping to connect the dots between disciplines and schools of thought, and between theory and practice. And in their multiple roles – as educator, researcher, innovator and key members of the community – higher education institutions are in a vital position to support students, staff and the wider community in building the skills and capacities necessary to navigate complexity in support of resilience, equity, health and wellbeing worldwide.

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IAU SDG 3 cluster reports and whitepapers

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