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# Reconceptualising Assessment and Feedback to Promote Student Wellbeing

**SRHE**

SRHE Annual Research Conference  
11-13 December 2019  
Celtic Manor, Newport, Wales



# 1. Context – student wellbeing challenges

- Number of students disclosing a mental health condition has tripled since 2007/08 (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015)
- Students report significantly lower levels of mental wellbeing than the general population - more so for minority groups (Ferguson, 2017)
- HE sector is experiencing a 'mental health crisis' (The Guardian, August 2018)
- 20% Australian students experiencing a mental health issue (Carter *et al.* 2017) and a fifth of Canadian post-secondary students identifying as depressed, anxious or battling other mental health issues (Pang, 2017)



## 2. Student learning & wellbeing

- To enhance student wellbeing in HE, we need to work more closely with the emotional realm of learning
- Consider how we can support students and their emotions in learning
- We offer an example of success in working towards this, based in assessment practice (see Hill & West, 2019 – Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education)

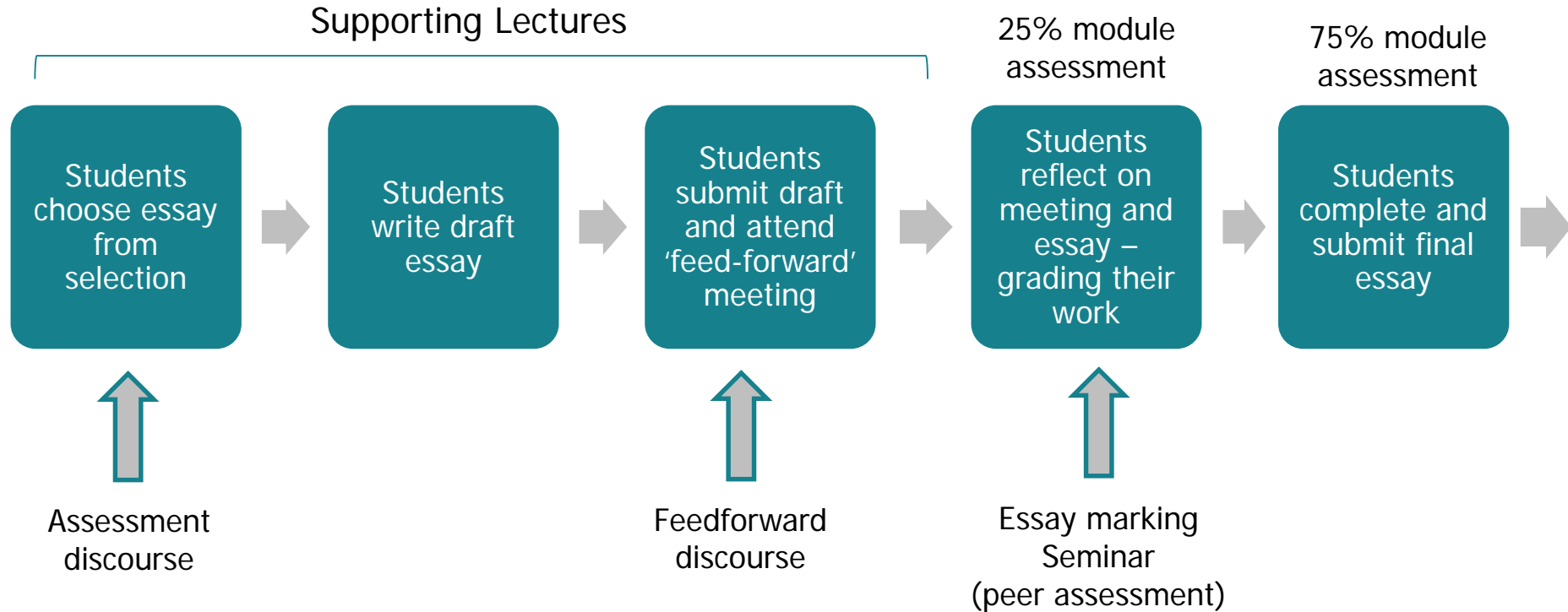
### 3. Assessment and wellbeing – discovering positive links

- AY 2015-2016 - new assessment approach implemented on a second year geography module in a British university
- Aimed to improve student learning experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment
- Focus was initially cognitive:
  - Did the approach assert a **positive influence on the student learning experience?**
  - Did it **enhance student performance** and **raise NSS scores** related to feedback?





# Module teaching and assessment structure





## Qualitative case study approach

- Individual semi-structured interviews ... two consecutive year 2 cohorts at end of module (2015-16 and 2016-17) ... analysed thematically via grounded theory
- $n = 44$  ( x 30 mins ), 61% response rate: male = 45% female = 55%
- Group semi-structured interviews with level 3 students (2016-2018) elucidating post-assignment behaviours and skills of self-efficacy and self-regulation
- Essay performance data pre- and post-assessment intervention (inferential stats)
- Answers to NSS feedback questions (asked in the interviews)



## Results - Enhanced learning experience

- **Conversation** compelled students to **engage critically** with their work:

*'When I have had drafts handed back to me and it's just written over, either I don't understand what they are trying to say, or it's not clear enough. I can ask you questions if we're talking to each other about it, it's easier to see things ... It's definitely better to talk about it'*

*'I've had it before where you get electronic feedback and you might not be sure what some of the comments mean ... being able to discuss it is important. You get that progress and can discuss how you can change it as opposed to just saying this is wrong'*



# Results - Enhanced student performance

Band (%)	2011-2012 (%)	2012-2013 (%)	2015-2016 (%)	2016-2017 (%)
0-39 (inc. NS)	16	5	0	5.5*
40-49	9	14	3*	5.5*
50-59	34	38	28	17
60-69	41	38	58	58
70-100	0	5	11	14
Number (n)	32	37	36	36

**Significantly higher marks 2015-17 v 2011-13**  
( $p = <0.0001$ )

**Average Ecology mark 4.5% higher than average mark for other second year optional modules**  
( $p = 0.01$ )



Dialogic assessment

\* Did not have a meeting



## The emergence of the affective realm

- Inherently emotional experience for students of receiving assessment feedback
- Clear evolution in emotions over the feed-forward process:

**apprehensive, scared, disappointed, upset, ashamed**



**enjoyment, satisfaction, enthusiasm, motivation**

- For some, the meetings were cathartic, reducing their anxiety as they 'came clean' with their level of progress - regained in-task self-efficacy



- Students noted that the individualised nature of the meeting made them feel valued:

*'I definitely felt like **you cared** about what I was getting'*

- Consciously encountering and talking through emotions in a collaborative manner supported a personalised and inclusive learning experience

*'Generic comments can be good ... but you never know whether they are applicable to you or not. So **getting personalised feedback is really useful**'*

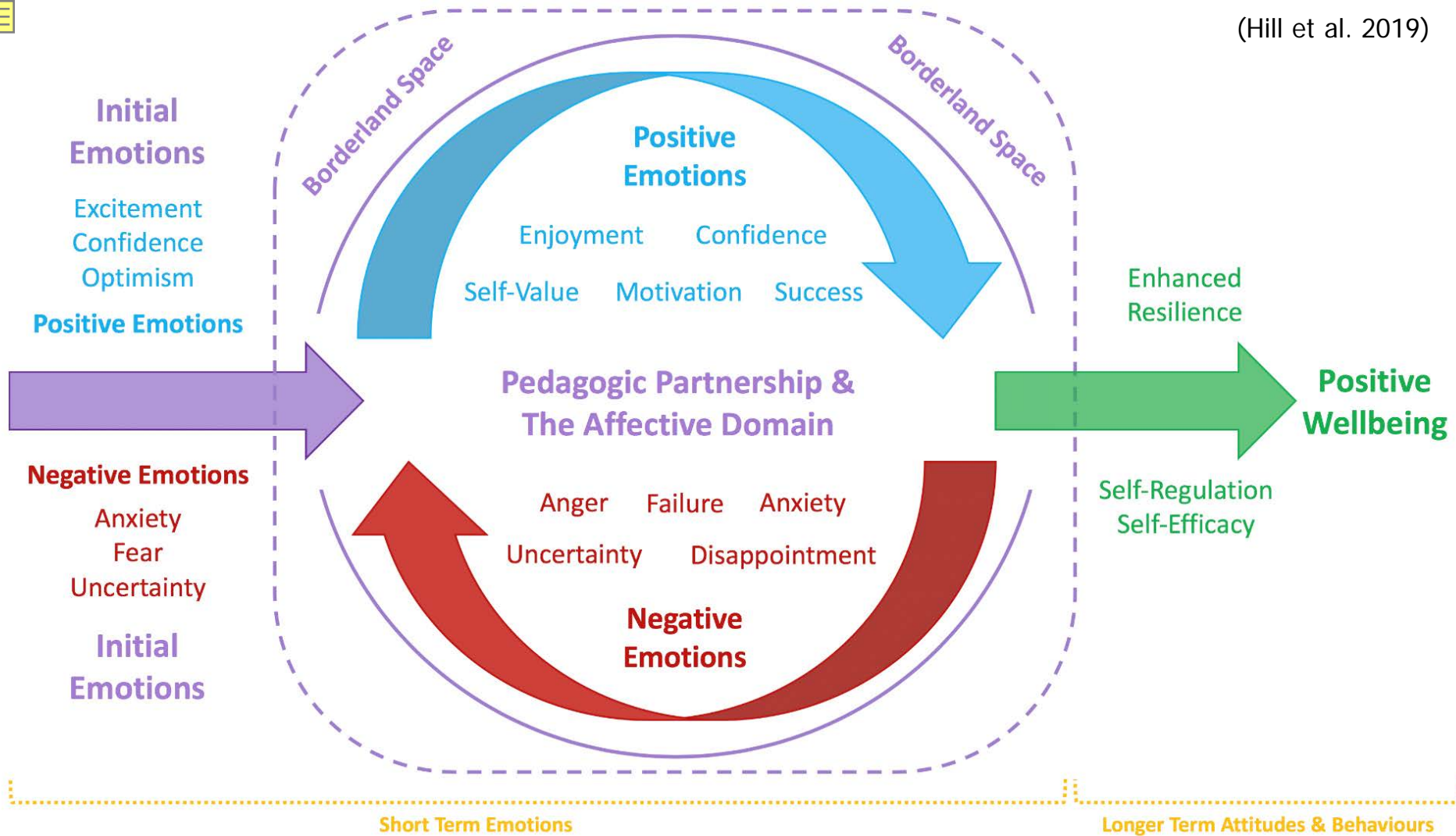


- Students reported altered behaviour post-meeting, within-task and with respect to other second year work:

*'It's altered the way I approach other modules, like essay plans for exams'*

- In third year, students self-avowed to increased self-efficacy, believing more strongly in their capabilities to accomplish assignments:

*'I definitely had a deeper understanding of the assessment process – not only planning for and writing an essay but being able to self-critique and understand my flaws'*





Hill et al. (2016): borderland spaces of learning



**Dare to discover all that you can become**



## 4. Conclusions

- Faculty should not divorce the affective realm of learning from the cognitive as wellbeing issues rise into sharp focus in HE
- Consciously uniting these two realms allows learning to be tackled holistically, supporting students to develop positive emotions and resilient academic behaviours
- We recognise this may not be easy for faculty and, as such, we offer some practical advice ...



## 5. Implications for practice

- Relate to students in ways that are hospitable and attuned to them as individuals
- Adopt active student-centred and social pedagogic approaches such as group work and inquiry-based learning
- Work with Educational Developers who can support you to work positively with the emotional aspects of learning / assessment



- Embed student-teacher assessment dialogue early in the curriculum and increase peer feedback in later years e.g.
  - year 2: teachers meet students individually to answer specific questions following peer-to-peer discussion
  - year 3: peer-to-peer mentoring supported by optional group / individual teacher meetings
- Use assessment approaches to support students to focus on the processes of learning and self-development (student-centred, constructivist)
- How committed / able are we, within current resource constraints, to re-conceptualise assessment & feedback?

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# Thank you for listening

## Questions?



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