Taxonomy of barriers and enablers to wellbeing in distance learning

By Kate Lister (kate.lister@open.ac.uk)

Curriculum design was critical; Structure, routine and flexibility within curriculum design were recurrent enablers

Forums were highlighted as an enabler; students perceive that they can get support on a forum

In the tuition category, tutors were mentioned both positively and negatively. They were enablers if they genuinely cared, showed enthusiasm and commitment, and if students knew they had the tutor's support

It seems to be important to recreate in the online setting the kind of free flow dialogue, a discussion that you get in a face-to-face environment

Assessments being clearly worded was mentioned as extremely important. Unclear assessment instructions or criteria were extremely triggering anxiety for students.

Feedback is seen as an enabler if lecturer and students managed to develop a relationship based on trust

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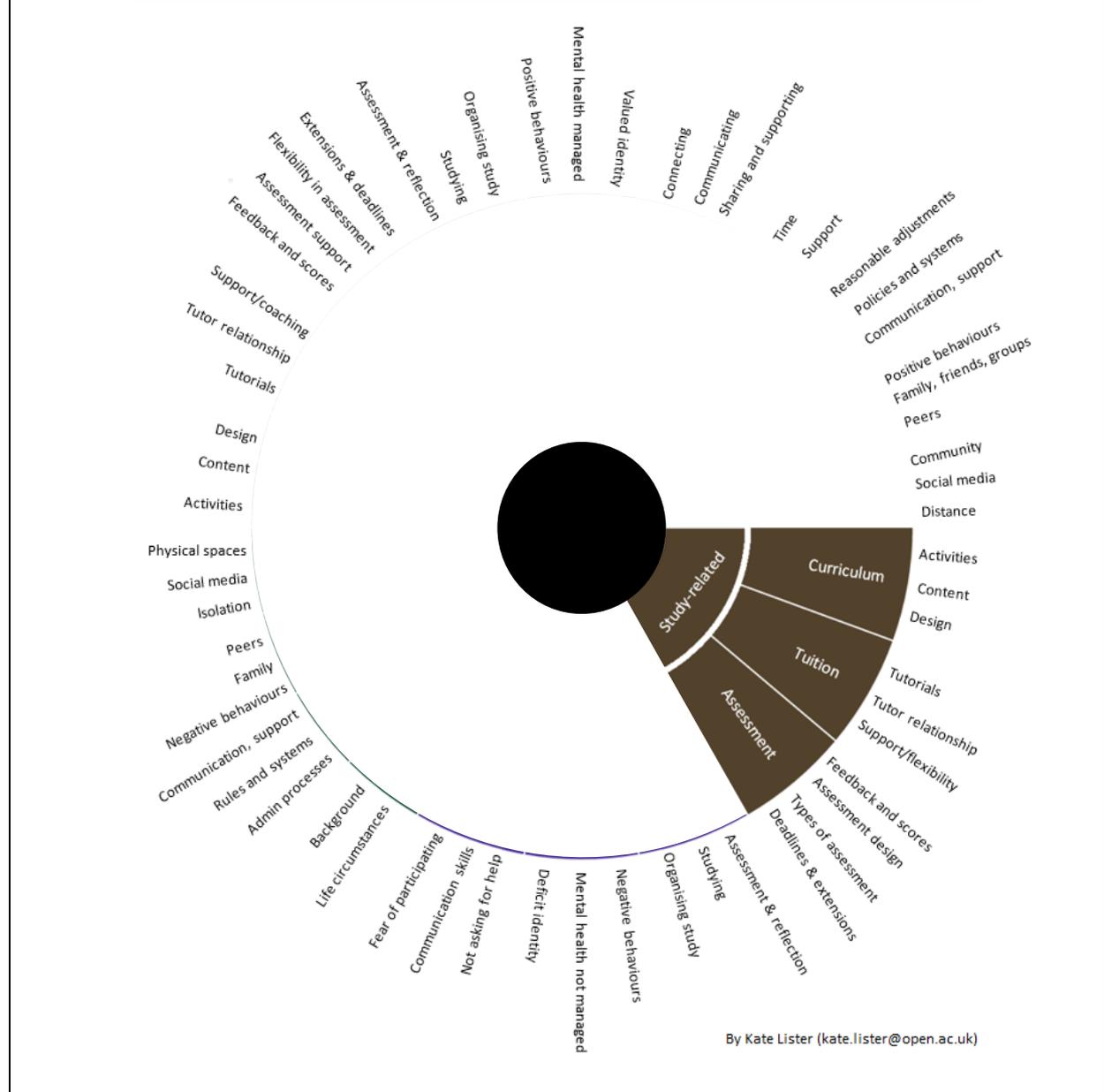
students and tutors both highlighted workload as a barrier: Even perceived workload which causes a panic mode; too much to do, can't cope!'

Activities within the curriculum could be challenging, collaborative activities in particular when participants don't like to interact with people.

Tutors were viewed as problematic if they were unkind or patronizing, if they were 'really not helpful', if they 'told off' the student or if students were given different advice from the tutor and the moderators

Exams were exclusively mentioned as a barrier.

Negative feedback, and the fear of negative feedback, were highlighted as barriers.

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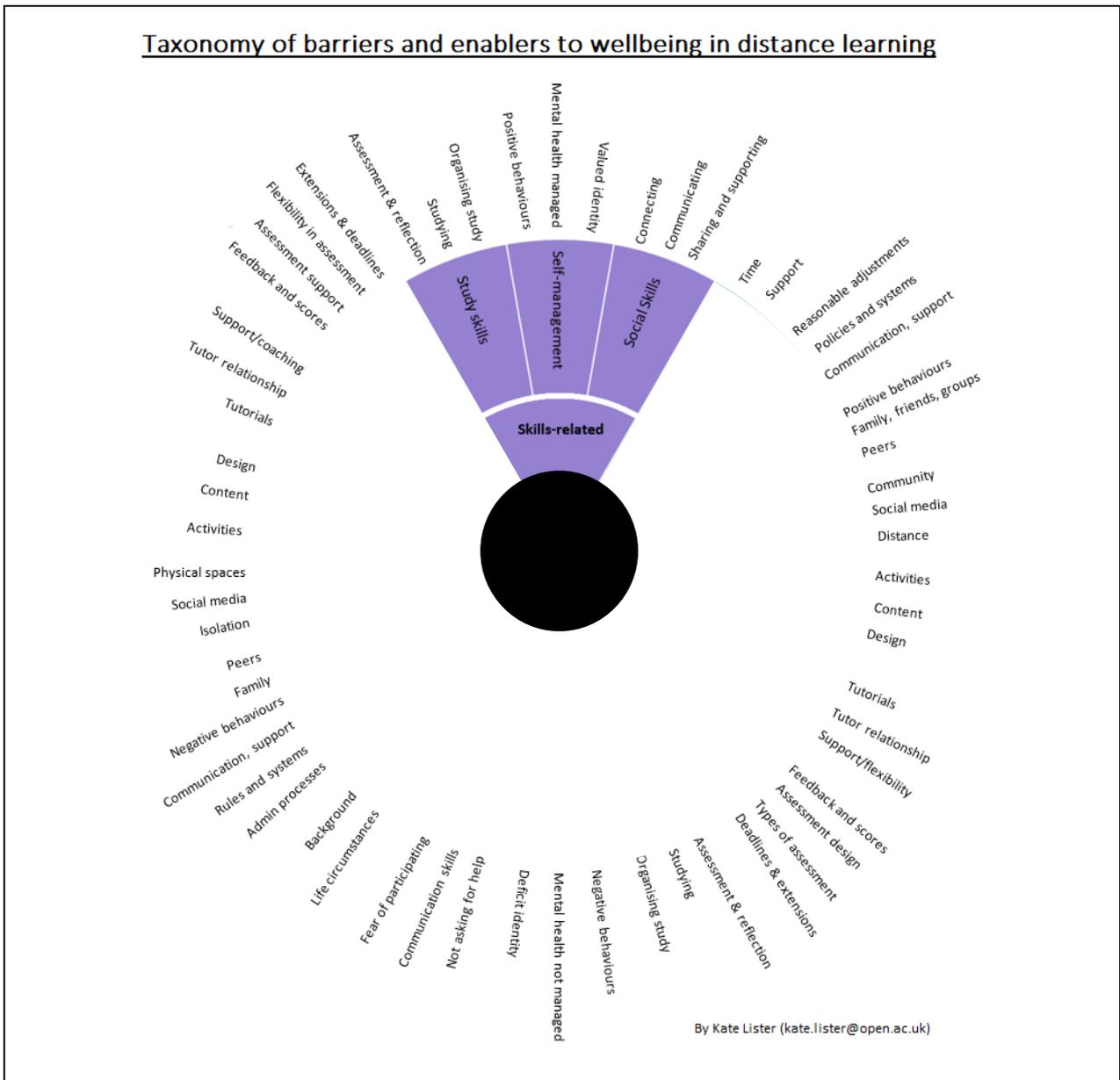
acquirement of skills or confidence in skills were seen as an enabler. This category was broken down into study skills, social skills, and self-management skills.

Social skills refer to how students related to other people in their courses.

Study skills were both a key enabler when present, and a clear barrier when not. Students needed help to *learn how to study effectively,* how to take notes and how to revise, or even learning to concentrate for longer, and to learn time management skills. Once these skills were acquired they became enablers as students reported growing confidence.

Self-management skills related to positive behaviours, students' confidence and sense of identity and belonging. An important aspect of identity was recognising growth and success. Taking time to celebrate successes was just as important as managing expectations.

Mental Health management in the form of e.g. taking part in positive activities provided, collecting souvenirs, reminders and outputs (including photo albums, common facebook page or website, group song, etc.) from positive activities were mentioned as beneficial

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lack of skills caused distress or a barrier. Social skills related barriers were primarily in terms of communication, not asking for help, and fear of participating in forums and tutorials, which for some caused anxiety.

Study skills were both a key enabler when present, and a clear barrier when not. Students needed help to *learn how to study effectively,* how to take notes and how to revise, or even learning to concentrate for longer, and to learn time management skills. Once these skills were acquired they became enablers.

Absence of study skills was a clear barrier.
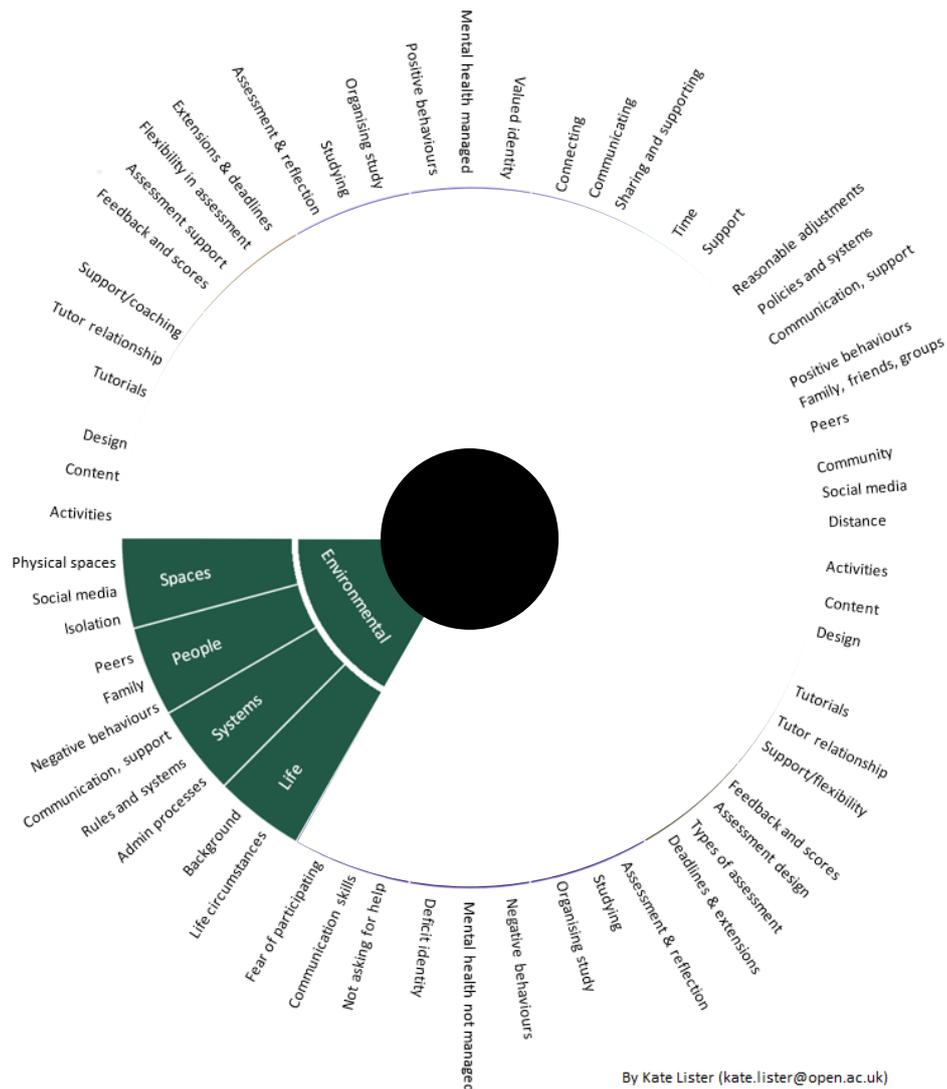
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Mental health managed · positive behaviours · Valued identity · Connecting · Communicating · Sharing and supporting · Organising study · Studying · Assessment & reflection · Assessment support · Extensions & deadlines · Flexibility in assessment · Feedback and scores · Support/coaching · Tutor relationship · Tutorials · Design · Content · Activities · Physical spaces · Social media · Isolation · Peers · Family · Negative behaviours · Communication, support · Rules and systems · Admin processes · Background · Life circumstances · Fear of participating · Communication skills · Not asking for help · Deficit identity · Mental health not managed · Negative behaviours · Organising study · Studying · Assessment & reflection · Deadlines & extensions · Types of assessment · Assessment design · Feedback and scores · Support/flexibility · Tutor relationship · Tutorials · Design · Content · Activities · Distance · Social media · Community · Peers · Family, friends, groups · Positive behaviours · Communication, support · Policies and systems · Reasonable adjustments · Support · Time

Life · Systems · People · Spaces · Environmental

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There was a fine line between the distance environment being a barrier or an enabler. In an online setting it is important to establish a link between the participants and a feeling of belonging and pride to associate with the people met and activities conducted. For many students not having to attend an in-person class was seen as positive and enabling.

Social media was generally seen as a positive space.

University systems, structures and administrative processes were strongly felt as both barriers and enablers. Understanding the need for certain structures, reminders of deadlines, assistance in filling in forms, offering learning materials in different formats, etc. can change these into enablers.

Communication from the institution needs to be forthcoming and proactive to be enabling.

People clearly had the power to be a positive or negative influence on study or wellbeing. Peers were generally an enabler;

Life circumstances were enablers if students had time and support to be able to study.

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'Isolation' was a clear barrier for students.
Communication from the institution was often seen as a clear barrier.
Peers were felt to be a barrier if students felt they were '*being judged and disliked*'
General life circumstances had enormous potential to be barriers. Barriers included work, bereavement, family or relationship issues, illness, pregnancy and maternity, and also background issues such as economic status and coming to terms with sexuality.

A key finding of this study is that barriers and enablers were found in the majority of themes, implying that aspects of the study can be both barriers or enablers for mental wellbeing and study success, depending on who is experiencing them and how. Crucially, this implies that there is potential for many of the barriers students experience to become enablers; for example, assessment feedback was a barrier for students when it was negative, but was an enabler when it was constructive and took place in an environment of trust. Similarly, lack of study skills was a barrier, but confidence in study skills was an enabler. This presents an interesting contrast to individualistic interventions, such as aiming to reduce assessment-related stress with a mindfulness intervention (Galante et al., Citation2018), implying instead that the assessment design could require investigation.