

Supporting mental wellbeing remotely with a 3D immersive virtual reality environment

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THE ORIGINAL

REDBRICK

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Activity Undertaken

01

Activity Undertaken

The SHELTA (Support & Help Environment for Learners To Access) is a 3D immersive virtual reality environment that facilitates remote peer and tutor support for health students on clinical placement. The SHELTA was developed by Draw and Code (a local software development company) as part of our successful £200k Office for Students funded mental wellbeing project bid. The software, in conjunction with 3D VR Quest 2 headsets, places users into a calming 3D tropical beach environment where students and tutors can meet for reflection and mutual support. Users create their own "avatar" and engage with others through the avatars and real-time speech.

Students can use the island for confidential discussions with support tutors, meet socially, undertake formal group peer reflection, or engage in mindfulness and meditation with a range of guided audio tracks that use the VR environment as a focus. The project provides a more immersive social experience than existing remote solutions such as Zoom, and aims to reduce feelings of isolation and depression by providing an enjoyable and realistic forum for accessing support and interaction.

Activity Implementation

02

Activity Implementation

Participants are recruited via email and invited to use SHELTA during one of their clinical placements. Participating students are provided with a VR headset and instructions. They then use the headset in their spare time whenever they wish while on placement; this can be in clinical sites across the UK ranging from Plymouth to Dundee. Students can use the mindfulness resources offline to help develop their resilience and reduce anxiety. They also have the opportunity to engage with peers and tutors informally at weekly “open beach” events on the Island. Students can also request a confidential 1:1 tutor support session; these sessions provide an opportunity to chat and receive signposting to more formal mental wellbeing support and resources.

Programme provision & student experience

03

Programme provision & student experience

Evaluation is still ongoing, but informal feedback indicates that students find SHELTA to be useful, engaging and fun. The mindfulness resources are reducing anxiety levels and improving mental wellbeing. Students also enjoy the informal weekly catch-ups where they can chat about clinical experiences, share tips for TV programmes or simply enjoy each other's company. Previous data has indicated that health students nationally can struggle on placement, so we are confident that this will improve wellbeing and the overall student experience.



Challenges faced

04



Challenges faced

Initial uptake of the mental wellbeing application was slow; this was partly due to the need for students to consent to participation and complete regular data collection surveys. We provided incentives to participate which increased uptake. We believe that deployment of the application via the headsets as part of routine student support without the requirement for data collection will prove popular and effective.

Liverpool Curriculum Framework

05

Liverpool Curriculum Framework

Research-connected teaching

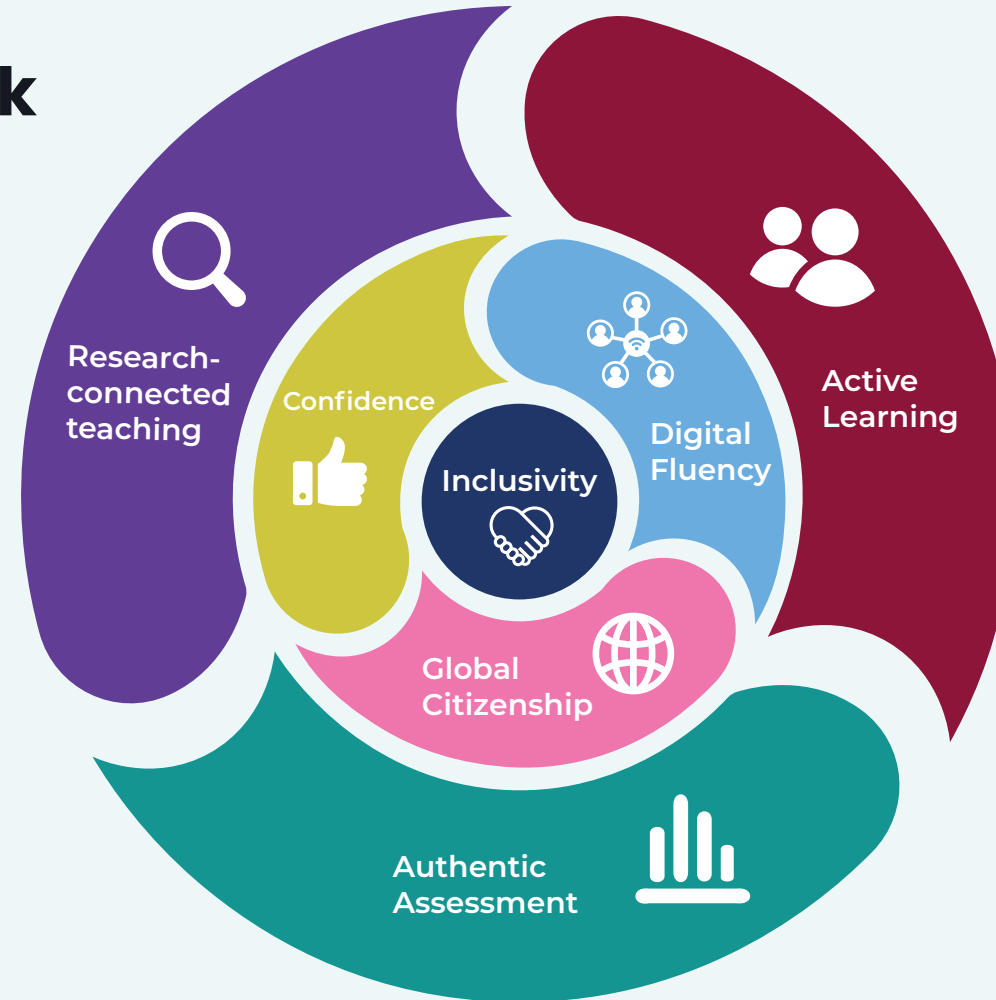
Feeds current research into the syllabus, develops students' understanding of research processes and engages them in enquiry-based projects so they are producers and not just consumers of knowledge.

Active learning

Engages, enthuses and challenges students in the learning process through activities, often collaborative and reflective, inside and outside the classroom; students construct knowledge and build independence.

Authentic assessment

Assesses students using tasks that mirror those they might undertake as professionals or citizens through choice of purpose, format, intended audience, resources, and collaborative or student-designed elements.



Confidence

Confident graduates are curious, creative, proactive and resilient; they are engaged with the world beyond the University and able to adapt and apply their knowledge in new contexts.

Digital fluency

Digitally fluent graduates think critically about the information they find, use and generate, developing their ability to use digital platforms to problem-solve, create, collaborate, and communicate.

Global citizenship

Global citizens are active members of their community from the local to the global, the personal to the professional, committing to principles of equality, fairness and sustainability.

Graduate attributes

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Graduate attributes

The SHELTA application is designed to build resilience through mindfulness training, equipping students to undertake remote work-based placements while gaining and providing peer support. As such it is a key element of the Confidence attribute.

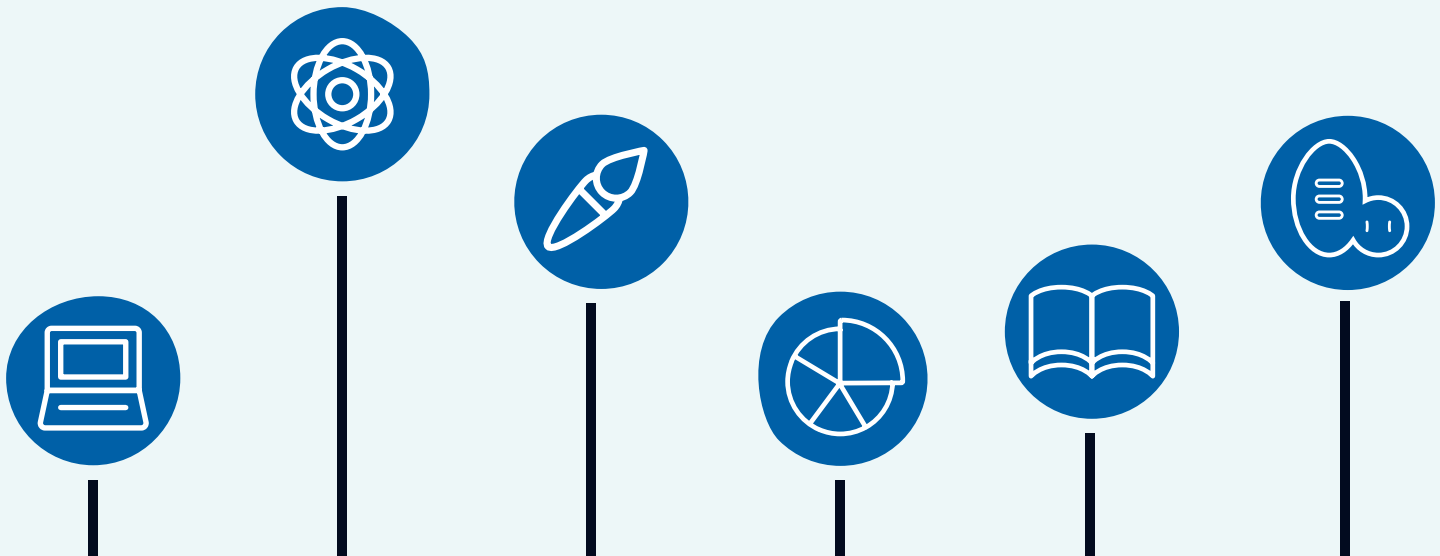
It also relates strongly to the Global Citizenship attribute by facilitating pseudoanonymity through the use of avatars. This frees users from identifying their gender, ethnicity or other protected characteristics, promoting inclusivity within the VR environment. Users also gain valuable experience of operating within a VR environment, providing exposure to emerging digital technology as part of the Digital Fluency hallmark.

Other disciplines

08

Other disciplines

Mental wellbeing support is essential for all students, especially those undertaking work –based placements away from home. This application is suitable for students who experience anxiety or depression and would benefit from mindfulness training and remote and pseudo–anonymous peer or tutor support. Deployment to other disciplines would require the purchase of VR headsets. Once the evaluation is complete, the application will be ready for wider use. This activity requires purchase of a batch of VR headsets, a willing cohort of students and staff members who are able to interact with the cohort in the VR environment.



Advice

09

Advice

There is an emerging range of VR environments designed for mental wellbeing and also some useful VR-based mindfulness applications but the SHELTA is the only one that incorporates the VR environment as the focus of the mindfulness practice and allows peer and tutor informal contact. Implementation of this activity requires purchase of a batch of VR headsets, a willing cohort of students and some staff members who are able to interact with the cohort in the VR environment.

The key issues we had to overcome were initial fears and scepticism of users regarding the new technology. Many VR applications are capable of inducing vertigo or motion sickness in users; largely related to rapidly changing points of view and a disconnect between the visual stimulus and other senses. Overcoming this relied on the development and sharing of short video clips highlighting how the environment works and reinforcing the safe and relaxing nature of the application.



Contact

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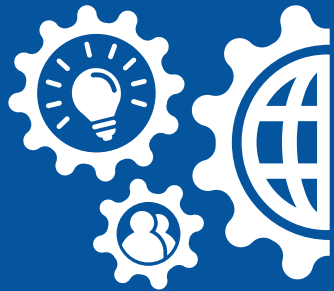
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