



CBS WELL-BEING LAB

Outline of a transformative capability approach to student well-being at CBS

2025

THE CBS TRANSFORMATIVE CAPABILITY APPROACH TO STUDENT WELL-BEING

Beyond the individual: towards a human approach to well-being

This note outlines the foundational principles for the CBS Transformative Capability Approach, positioning CBS as a frontrunner in reimagining how universities cultivate well-being in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. It frames well-being as a shared educational responsibility rooted in the humanities, offering a meaningful alternative to prevailing psychological-instrumental models and making it closely aligned with real-world business challenges.

A key point of the note is to show how well-being can be aligned with the Nordic Nine to reinforce CBS's identity as a place of ethical and human formation. As an addition to existing well-being initiatives, it forms a base for approaching well-being in education, student development, and institutional culture. It draws on experiences from CBS Well-being Lab, where students and researchers co-create insights to improve well-being at CBS and beyond. The lab serves as a hub for the testing and integration of the approach into and across study programs.

Well-being is not about removing pain but about preparing for reality

Today's students are not just expected to perform well academically. They are also expected to manage their emotions, stay positive, and demonstrate visible composure. At the same time, many universities adopt well-being frameworks with the primary aim to reduce discomfort. In doing so, these models risk failing to prepare students for the emotional and ethical demands of the real-world businesses. Their responses often rely on psychological and individualized tools like self-care apps, resilience training, and mindfulness programs. A commonly used instrument within these frameworks is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), which measures students' mental well-being. While useful for benchmarking, this tool risks pathologizing students' struggles and overlooking the institutional culture around them. It tells us how students are coping one by one — not how they are growing together.

In our approach, well-being is not the absence of distress, but the presence of ethical and relational capabilities: judgment, reflection, and meaningful self-relation embedded in supportive relationships with others. It is cultivated not by avoiding discomfort, but by learning to engage with it. We wish to call individual vulnerabilities to the forefront and reveal them for what they (also) are: shared human conditions. These cannot be removed - but they might be transformed.

Transformative capabilities and the dynamic between students and their ecosystems

The Transformative Capability Approach focuses on nurturing existential, human capabilities like empathy and self-reflection – and on creating cultures of collective resilience where these may grow. Taking inspiration from the arts and humanities, we wish to apply methods that help us ask deeper questions: What capabilities do we want our students to develop to flourish together so they may live with the (painful) complexities of the real world? How can we help them learn to view individual vulnerabilities as shared conditions?

With the recent attention generated towards Nordic Nine, much great work has already been done within CBS to give weight and nuance to the importance of transformative capabilities. They have been linked to the societal need for sensitive solutions to wicked problems (Thomasson 2024) and been core to the successful

(re)forming of new and existing study programs (Frandsen & Scheibye 2024). While addressing the slightly different issue of student well-being, this Transformative Capability Approach is also a strategic deepening of CBS's educational mission. It offers a philosophical, pedagogical, and practical foundation for supporting all Nordic Nine principles.

Where this approach truly adds to Nordic Nine is in addressing the “together” in all of this. The capabilities we call for are context-sensitive, relationally enabled, and continuously evolving with the surrounding social ecosystem. This includes social norms, peer cultures, teachers, businesses, administrative systems, digital platforms, and technological forces. Specifically with AI, the outsourcing of judgement risks making students more proficient in choosing between AI outputs than taking a critical stance, engaging with ambiguity, or building fruitful relationships with each other. However, to properly cultivate the human judgement so critical to well-being, we need to consider the current barriers facing today's students.

Judgment, shame, and fear of other people's opinion

Research from CBS Wellbeing Lab shows that students increasingly experience well-being as conditional on meeting both external expectations and internalized ideals. Influenced by growing digitalization and acceleration, many students relate to themselves through hyper-judgment, marked by anxiety over appearance, performance, and moral inadequacy.

The concept of shame is core to these experiences. Shame has been well-documented in relation to stress in the workplace (Pedersen 2016; 2021) and has shown fruitful in terms of explaining the vulnerabilities of younger generations (Pedersen & Eriknauer 2024). In addition, the concept of FOPO (fear of people's opinion) has proven useful in describing how fear of judgment inhibits vulnerability and trust in learning communities (Gervais 2019). Given shame and FOPO, judgment becomes paradoxical: it holds the capacity to affirm the self through recognition, but it also comes with the risk of alienating the self through constant comparison. This issue has become a chronic condition for the younger generations who live in a constant state of self-surveillance, seeking validation without space for solitude or genuine reflection. This is a social-psychological complexity that well-being initiatives need to respond to.

During this spring, CBS Wellbeing Lab conducted explorative research on student well-being as seen from the perspective of teachers across CBS (Gürsoy & Pedersen, 2025 forthcoming). Special mention was given to the lack of physical attendance. Importantly, attendance is seen as both a cause and effect of well-being. This highlights the need for better knowledge, guidelines and materials that strengthen the students' sense of both feeling welcome, curious and obligated to attend and participate actively.

Cultivating capabilities through academic student citizenship and collective resilience

Taking inspiration from recent innovation in the SEM study program, we wish to include the concept of *academic student citizenship* as a part of how we approach well-being at CBS. Academic student citizenship addresses students as active, lifelong learners, while underlining the shared academic interest as a foundation for addressing mutual expectations between students as well as between students and teachers. As Frandsen and Scheibye (2024) point out, transformative capabilities are critically linked with the agency of the learner as they involve self-reflectiveness about how to responsibly enable change in the environment. Guided by research from CBS Well-being Lab, we propose that students are expected to develop three capabilities:

- Response-ability – the capacity to respond meaningfully to others
- Critical judgement – critical distance to your own perspectives as well as those of others
- Generosity – the embodied act of giving

These capabilities enable students to reflect critically on internalized expectations, relate to others without losing oneself in comparison, and find the courage to make meaningful choices under uncertainty. At *citizen* level, this means we need to redefine individual resilience to include existential insight and critical distance – not just endurance. At *citizenship* level, we encourage that we include the idea of *collective resilience*, engaging both teachers and students in open discussion on what healthy student environments look like.

This coming semester, we are doing a pilot project in collaboration with the SEM study board where we will test a series of well-being-related events as a way of embedding these principles in the 1st year study program. The idea is to cultivate judgement through dialogue and shared inquiry, which is where engagement with the arts and humanities becomes helpful.

Taking inspiration from the arts and humanities

Facing the power of shame and FOPO, a very practical issue is how to cultivate meaningful dialogue in and around the classroom. We propose exploring narrative and artistic practices as possible solutions to this. The goal of the narrative dimension is for our approach to become a lived, co-authored culture. This could take shape as the use of dialogue cards to unfold dilemmas, or storytelling events where students share their own stories of doubt and growth. The goal of working with the arts is to create tangible and inspiring teaching materials that peak senses and emotions and spark that initial engagement in dialogue on vulnerable topics.

CBS Wellbeing Lab is currently developing two art-based pilot projects that experiment with combining research and art into materials that could enhance the development of transformative capabilities. One is centered around a short film depicting shame narratives, the other tries to create a loop between students, research and musicians: a combination research and students' stories of (lack of) well-being will be re-interpreted into music and lyrics which then are used as dialogical tools in class.

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