Providing Pastoral Support during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Much has been written recently about educational inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Some attention has also been given to how the pandemic is disproportionately impacting the lives of disabled people and those who experience mental ill health.[2] As practitioners who work with Foundation Year students will know, our cohorts tend to include high numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds as well as many with disabilities and diagnosed mental illnesses.[3] It is therefore no surprise that providing effective pastoral support has been an important and challenging task in recent months—particularly as we all get to grips with using unfamiliar technologies such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. In this blog post, I share a couple of simple strategies that I found effective in providing support to Humanities FY students through the COVID-19 pandemic. Though on 1 June 2020 I took up a new post as FY Director for the College of Arts and Humanities at Swansea University, here I draw from the final months of my tenure as Humanities FY Lead at the University of Plymouth. I end this post by raising some questions that we might wish to consider further.

Signposting via Tutorials

One of the things that I leant on most heavily during this period was the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training that I completed in April 2019. In particular, I found

the MHFA's model of ALGEE invaluable.[4] In the 'Helpful Resources' section below, I provide links to some useful online resources that I referred students to while using this approach. In terms of practically applying the MHFA training, I found it helpful to arrange tutorials with students via Zoom: I invited all students to end-of-year meetings and those struggling at particular moments to additional on-request tutorials. Interestingly, the uptake and attendance rate for end-of-year tutorials was much higher than expected: all 20 students who booked meetings attended online, whereas in Semester One only 14 out of 16 of the same cohort attended face-to-face tutorials. Ultimately, 39 out of 44 students managed to submit and pass their final assignments.

Social Events

At Plymouth, lockdown hit a week prior to the start of the Easter holidays. With three major deadlines approaching before the end of the semester and all of the anxiety and displacement arising, I grew concerned about students feeling isolated and becoming disconnected from the course. Taking inspiration from my Head of School, who introduced regular online socials for staff, framed as 'Zoom Kitchens', I arranged weekly versions of these for my Foundation students during the Easter holidays. I kept the sessions informal, with no strict agenda. They were mainly an opportunity for students to catch up with each other and continue to feel part of a community. To add a little fun, I finished each session with a quick pub quiz. The sessions weren't especially well attended (5-8 students came along to each one), but those who did attend made it clear that they enjoyed them as it helped them to feel connected. The most positive aspect of the Zoom Kitchens was that they were enjoyed by some students who had experienced significant personal difficulties throughout the year

and in lockdown. Following the success of these socials, I co-hosted a final end-of-year celebration, which took a similar format to before but with a more elaborate quiz, a poetry competition, and prizes. This session was more popular, with over 15 student attendees, making for a slightly chaotic but fun afternoon. Overall, these sessions, which were simple, enjoyable, and not very time-consuming to organise seemed to really lift spirits. Before I left Plymouth, I received over a dozen personal farewell messages from students, thanking me for my support. Several of these specifically mentioned the social events and the pastoral support I provided. I was also flattered to be nominated for Plymouth's 2020 Student Staff Teaching and Representation (SSTAR) Award for 'Sensational Programme Lead'.

Further Challenges

I have heard colleagues discuss the potential challenges of teaching new groups of students online for the first time. But what about the additional challenges of supporting those students pastorally, particularly the ones who might come from challenging backgrounds or who have recent experiences of trauma? It seems as though many universities are hoping to maximise the amount of face-to-face teaching that they can safely deliver in September, but, given restrictions on space, the blended model will dictate that a reasonable percentage of our 'contact' with students will be digitally augmented—and, perhaps more so than ever before, asynchronous. How can we ensure that we build important tutor-tutee relationships early on within this new landscape? Space and time on university campuses will surely come at a premium in September but I wonder whether in addition to prioritising face-to-face teaching we need to push for face-to-face personal tutoring sessions to be built into timetable planning models. Of course, such sessions would

not help those who will be unable to study on our campuses, such as those who will be shielding. How do we ensure that these students feel included, supported, and part of the university community? Also, how is it best to support students whose conditions at home are the cause or catalysts of the difficulties that they experience? Is email an effective tool for pastoral support if speaking on the phone or on Zoom is not appropriate for particular students? How do we ensure that disadvantaged students are provided the technology and conditions necessary to not only engage with online teaching but also pastoral support and the university community more widely speaking? How can we ensure that both our blended teaching and pastoral support are fully inclusive and accessible? What can we do as FY practitioners to raise these issues to our institutions? These are some difficult questions, but perhaps ones that we can start unpacking during our discussions at the FYN Annual Conference.

Helpful Resources

In addition to university-specific support services, I also found the advice on the following pages helpful to refer students to:

(For maintaining wellbeing and looking after one's mental health during the pandemic)

https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coronavirus-covid-19-staying-at-home-tips/

https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak

(For bereavement support)

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/social-distancing/bereavement-advice-and-support/

https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/need-know-info/coronavirus-bereavement-advice/

Notes

[1] See, for example, Richard Adams and Heather Stewart, 'Keeping Schools Closed in England will Widen Inequalities – Study', <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/may/18/keeping-schools-closed-in-england-will-widen-educational-inequalities-study-ifs> [accessed 2 July 2020]; Craig Jeffrey, 'Students Are the Generation Most Affected by Covid-19. Universities Must Respond', <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/students-are-generation-most-affected-covid-19-universities-must-respond> [accessed 2 July 2020]; and Jamie Doward, 'Covid Will Reinforce Race Inequality at Oxbridge, Warn Experts', <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jun/21/covid-will-reinforce-race-inequality-at-oxbridge-warn-experts> [accessed 2 July 2020].
[2] See, for instance, Laura Hampson, 'How Lockdown Is Exacerbating Existing Mental Health Issues', <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/healthy-at-home/mental-health/lockdown-affecting-mental-health-issues-a4441626.html> [accessed 2 July 2020]; Matt Mathers, 'Extra Stress and Anxiety for People with Mental Health Problems, Warns Charity', <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/coronavirus-stress-mental-health-problems-anxiety-covid-19-a9401061.html> [accessed 2 July 2020]; Jasmine Anderson, 'UK Coronavirus Deaths: Two in Three People who Died from Covid-19 Had a Disability, ONS Statistics Show', < https://inews.co.uk/news/health/coronavirus-deaths-uk-covid-19-ons-statistics-disability-figures-460326> [accessed 2 July 2020]; John Pring, 'Coronavirus: Disabled People Have Been Excluded and Marginalised, Says Report', <https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/coronavirus-disabled-people-have-been-excluded-and-marginalised-says-report/> [accessed 2 July 2020].
[3] Tej Nathwani, 'Year 0: A Foundation for Widening Participation?', <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/blog/16-05-2019/foundation-year-research> [accessed 2 July 2020].
[4] **ALGEE** stands for '**A**pproach the person, assess and assist with any crisis[;] **L**isten and communicate non-judgementally; **G**ive support and information; **E**ncourage the person to get appropriate professional help; **E**ncourage other supports'. MHFA England, *Adult MHRA Handbook* (London: MHFA England), p. 27.

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