Transcript – Supporting students' mental health as part of the career and employability journey
Host: John McLuckie
Guest Speaker: Allie Scott

John McLuckie: 0:16

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. In this episode we'll be talking to Allie Scott, UHI's Mental Health and Counselling Manager, about the University's approach to mental health support. My name is John McLuckie, and I'm delighted to be joined today by Allie Scott, welcome to the podcast, Allie.

Allie Scott: 0:34

Thank you very much, John. It's nice to be here.

John McLuckie: 0:37

The topic of mental health is absolutely crucial to student health and well-being. What was your route into the role of Mental Health and Counselling Manager with the university?

Allie Scott: 0:45

So I worked at Perth College since 2009 within their student support department and when I first started, I was the careers and employability advisor, and careers and guidance advisor I think it was called back then and just over the time at Perth I really started to get involved with student mental health and developing mental health support and creating different support mechanisms for students and at that time got very interested in counselling and how counselling could support people when they were having difficulties with their mental health and the place that that had in the university and college environment and I trained to be a counsellor in 2010. And I think from then, it just kind of really cemented that passion to help students in an educational setting to take control of their mental well-being to really develop a sense of self and to be able to enjoy their student experience and that's something I've felt really passionate about. So two years ago, I was asked to head up the service review, which was conducted by the University of the Highlands and Islands into the mental health support services offered across all of the partners that make up the university. I was delighted to be asked to do that and it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience being able to go and speak to all the partners, around the wonderful work that they were doing, towards supporting students' mental health difficulties. And from that review, which, consulted a wide range of student support staff, student support managers, and students most importantly came the decision that there needed to be a Mental Health and Counselling Manager post put in place to really coordinate and collaborate with all of the different partners around student mental health and I was very lucky to be successful in interviewing for that post and that's how it came about.

John McLuckie: 2:25

Fantastic and I know there won't be as such a thing as a typical day, but what does your role involve?

Allie Scott: 2:31

I think because it's a new role, it's been a really interesting year. So I've just finished my first year in post and some of that was partly still seconded and then in February it was made a permanent post, which was wonderful. But it's quite varied but the main focus for me this year has been getting the student mental health strategy in place and I really enjoyed that piece of work. So again, collaborating with all the partners and looking at, what did we want to be able to offer students what could we use as a framework to look at how we offer mental health support to students? So that had been my main kind of focus in the first few months within role and from the strategy came implementation planning. So again, working very closely with the partners as to what actions they might need to take to meet the aims of our strategy and within that strategy, there was six key strands. Probably the one that stands out the most for me is the suicide prevention and risk prevention work that we want to be doing as a university. So we take a student mental health incredibly seriously and obviously, at times where students might be at risk of harm to themselves or to others or you know, maybe experiencing suicidal thoughts, we want to be able to support them. So we're busy at the moment pulling together paperwork for that underneath the mental health strategy. We've also been looking at consistent staff training planning to help roll out training across the partnerships so in the last year, we have been delivering Scottish Mental Health First Aid across the partnership. So there were nine members of staff trained from different academic partners, to deliver the Mental Health First Aid qualification, which was fantastic. And we set ourselves a target of delivering at least one course at every academic partner in this academic year. We almost made it we unfortunately weren't able to deliver at Moray due to COVID or at Argyll. And we had hoped to deliver it online but unfortunately, at the moment, Health Scotland are not allowing us to deliver online. They want to make sure it's as robust as possible if it's going to be online delivery so, unfortunately, we just fell short of that, target but actually are really proud of the amount of work that we managed to deliver when it came to training across the partnership with a specific focus on Scottish Mental Health First Aid. There's been other training disseminated across the partnership. And actually, in February, I became a qualified ASIST trainer. But again, unfortunately COVID has come along. And again, we're not allowed to deliver ASIST online at the moment. So we're having to kind of delay the roll-out of ASIST training. But these are exciting things that are coming up. And that fit in very much with the strategy as a whole. So apart from the strategy, I'm also responsible for the student Mental Health Group, which is a group of student support staff who come together and very much focus on the healthy body healthy mind agenda from SSS and also the student mental health agreements from NUS Scotland. So this group is a group that comes together and really identifies key points and events in the academic calendar that we can help to raise awareness around student mental health, highlight any trends or any sort of key points that have come up for students in the student journey, work with HISA to represent any areas of feedback that they've had from students around what they would like to see going forward with student mental health. That group's pivotal actually in being able to provide that across the partnership and to make sure that it works successfully. Last year we obtained our three stars, with our healthy body healthy mind submission which was fantastic. This year, it has changed from NUS to SSS and some of the criteria is slightly different. So we're still working our way round the criteria for that, but we're looking forward to undertaking that challenge in the next academic year. I also coordinate the counselling network, so all our counsellors based across UHI come together for much needed CPD and support and to look at how we best support our students in a counselling framework. So it's a really good network of staff across the partnership. And again, we look at trends of mental health difficulties that students are reporting. So this year unsurprisingly, very high has been anxiety and people trying to manage with

very strange times and trying to kind of fathom out how that works for them and how that impacts on their student journey. So we've been doing a lot of work as a team in the counselling network, looking at how best we can support students and what we can offer to them. I also do a lot of external representation within my roles, so I sit on the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's special interest group for FE. So I'm involved with Kirsten Amis from Glasgow Clyde University, and also two other counsellors who are south of the border and we talk about relevant issues in Further Education for students accessing Mental Health and Counselling support. I also represent the University at the Scottish Heads of University Counselling Services meeting, which is where all the heads of the Scottish University Counselling Services meet on a quarterly basis, and talk about just trends across the sector, about what the Scottish University sector looks like around counselling and mental health. And I'm about to become chair of that group at the end of June, when Ronnie Miller at Edinburgh University is stepping down, so that's a really exciting opportunity for myself personally, but also very much for the University of the Highlands and Islands. A couple of years ago, I co-authored a paper around the trends and changes and challenges within counselling services for universities, which was a really enjoyable task to do, slightly challenging, but it was excellent to see how we're actually all working really hard together as a sector to provide the best support we can for mental health.

John McLuckie: 07:53

You mentioned representing UHI on external groups with regard to counselling, but you're also involved in online counselling for UHI.

Allie Scott: 08:01

So the university's online counselling service which is open to any university and college student, regardless of where they're based, accessed through the green button, I manage that and I have actually been involved with that since 2014. I was one of the original starter uppers, I suppose of the service and it's been excellent. And actually, this year, we've seen an 184% increase in referrals through the green button to the service, so you can see that students are very much looking for support at this time.

John McLuckie: 08:29

Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned earlier about how some of the training needs to be delivered face to face rather than online. How do you think training might change now with regard to how mental health is supported both online and face to face?

Allie Scott: 08:41

I think it isn't a difficulty actually, it's a really positive sign. It's about managing risk, and so teaching and delivering training around mental health obviously triggers things for us all, none of us are immune to mental health, none of us have not been touched by it and we will all be touched by it in our lifetime. And I think therefore, the reason that we've not been given the go ahead to deliver the certificated side of things is because of risk management and to make sure that if we are delivering

it, people are safe. And they're not going back into their houses on their own. And, running things over in their mind and maybe actually being really badly affected by what they've been learning or hearing about. So I don't think it will be no you can never deliver it, I think it's just taking time for Health Scotland and Living Works when it comes to ASIST to look at how it's safe to deliver this online. And that's the main thing and actually, that's something I think is really important to get across to everybody is actually we've been working really hard as a university, but certainly with the Mental Health Group and the counselling network to ensure that we're supporting students safely. And that's why we have a number of counsellors who are trained in online counselling, which is very different from face to face counselling, and that we are supporting our colleagues in how to safely deliver support to students, therapeutic interventions through online mediums and that's something that as a university we've taken extremely seriously, which is why we've not rushed to deliver training the moment and until we can assure it will be delivered safely and effectively, and that people get the most out of that experience. And that's both staff and students. And we are working collaboratively with external partners to look at what training might look like in the future.

John McLuckie: 10:17

Can I ask you about the green button which you've already touched on and could you also tell me about the Big White Wall?

Allie Scott: 10:23

OK, yeah. So basically, we are looking at different ways that we can offer support to students remotely because we are well aware that our student body is spread out across the Highlands and Islands and not necessarily based right next to an academic partner where they can go in and get face to face support. So myself and Lyndsay Sutherland, who is the Student Support Manager, are very much aware of the need to make sure that there's resources available online for students to help themselves if they need support. So we have very good student support pages on our UHI website that can be accessed by students with a whole list of various resources they can tap into. And one of those resources is a big, round green button a bit like the red button, which is where you can click on and ask for online counselling support regardless of which academic partner you're based at and it means that the student can then get support when they need it without having to go directly to their Student Services Department and ask for counselling in case they might know the person who works there or it's somebody's Auntie, it just provides that anonymous support for the student. It also means if you can't get to your Student Services Department for whatever reason, or you're not able to see a face to face counsellor, obviously at the moment that's challenging anyway. But you know, if you work nine to five and you study apart from that, it can be quite challenging. So the green button offers a chance for you to be able to reach out and look for support through the online counselling service. And then you asked about the Big White Wall. So recently in April, we got the Big White Wall package in place. And this is a 24 hour a day seven day a week support package for students and staff across the partnership looking at mental health. I don't know if you've had a chance to look at it yourself, John, but it's an amazing resource. There's so many useful courses that you can do. There's forums that you can be involved in. I have to confess I looked at the I don't even know if it's a confession. I'm quite proud of it. I looked at the procrastination tab not so long ago, as I was putting off a report that I didn't want to write. It's got brilliant resources in there. It's got an excellent one on sleep as well, because sometimes when we're finding ourselves stressed or under a

lot of anxiety, experiencing a lot of anxiety, one of the first things to go can be our sleep. And our sleep then knocks on to so many other things in our life and the sleep module on the Big White Wall is amazing. So again, you can access the Big White Wall through the student support pages on the UHI web page and I think all partners have got a banners at the bottom of their email signatures that you can click on and access directly and you just use your student login to go ahead and register for that and feedback so far, from both staff and students has been really, really positive. And the best thing is, it's managed by clinicians. So the people who are supporting you on that wall are qualified professionals, who can offer appropriate interventions when you need it.

John McLuckie: 13:05

And you also use social media?

Allie Scott: 13:08

So, part of my role is the UHI health and wellbeing page on Facebook. I know not everybody's on Facebook, but it's a platform that we kind of have found quite useful in sharing information about health and well-being to students. So when we were talking about sort of how we get information out to our students, that's one of the things I would highly recommend students sign up for. So it's UHI health and well-being, we post everything on there to do with, you know, financial issues or awareness raising events that are going on and simple daily tips sometimes just to help you manage. There's a thought for Thursday today, which is just about anxiety and how to kind of help manage anxiety and it's sort of takes two minutes to read. But there's some really pertinent points on there about stepping away from your computer when it feels a bit too much, taking deep breaths outside. We also try to engage with students, you know what, what makes you feel good. So we usually have something like Feel Good Friday and Motivation Monday and these types of things. So you know, it's a great way for students to be involved and feel connected to, and certainly we've had a few messages recently which have stated that it's been really useful for students not feeling so isolated at the moment. So I'd actively encourage students to sign up for it, and talk to us on the page.

John McLuckie: 14:15

That's great and I guess the area of mental health and counselling support has really come to the fore in the past couple of years. How do you see that developing from where we are now as we move into the future?

Allie Scott: 14:25

I think it's just becoming less stigmatized. So it's okay to talk about it. I mean, mental health has always been around mental ill health has always been around mental health difficulties have always been around. It's just that now, somehow society is allowing us, and I don't know if I like that terminology, but it kind of is how it feels to talk about it and to say actually it's okay to say, life gets tough sometimes and things don't always seem as rosy and I think that I'm just really passionate and positive and really hope within my role that we can get this whole university approach to mental health embedded so we become a culture that welcomes change and that supports everybody and is

accepting you know, I think that that's something I've always felt quite passionate about, we should be accepting of each other. So I'm really passionate that we will see significant improvements, although there's great work already being done and I want to make sure that's highlighted. But we're gonna just grow and go from strength to strength over the next few years and be able to get a lot of the sort of work that we're trying to do at the moment in place. And that then provides a robust and supportive environment for students which equips them for going on into their lives and getting the careers and the life goals that they want to achieve and I think that's really important.

John McLuckie: 15:35

You've partly answered what was going to be my last question around the support the university provides to students and just in terms of how that will assist how they look at preparing for their future career?

Allie Scott: 15:45

I think I mean, we hear all the time about developing resilience and that certain generations are maybe not as resilient and I don't like that terminology and I don't necessarily agree with it. What I think we need to do is recognise that society is very highly pressured these days, and there's a lot of expectations put on people that are unrealistic or unfair, and I think that that's not good from the outset. You know, so somebody coming into university or college already has a huge amount of pressure on them before they've even crossed the threshold. And then when you're at university and college, you're normally juggling multiple things, so family, jobs, living situations, you know, trying to make money stretch because money's sometimes quite tight when you're at university, you might be caring for somebody you might, you know, have young children, etc, etc. And I think it's very highly pressured. And I think that mental health services and support have a huge role in helping to allow people to acknowledge and normalize that certain levels of anxiety is kind of okay and having bad days is okay and help to then equip people to develop toolkits to cope with life's ups and downs and to really help them address and destigmatize themselves in some way when they're struggling so that when they go into an a place of work, they're able to cope with the challenges that that might throw at them. But equally, if they do have a mental health issue, or a diagnosis of a mental health condition that they're able to then say to their employer, this is what I have and I need support in these following areas. And to go in there and do that confidently. And I think that we are doing that across the partnership, we're really supporting students to take ownership of themselves in a really positive way. And to be able to say, this is who I am. This is the skills I know I have, these are the things that I know sometimes can cause me difficulties, but I know what to do to try and overcome those. And I'm going to tell you this from the outset, because as my employer, you can support me with this. And I think there's something about that culture on change where it's okay to tell people about the areas you might struggle with, to do with your mental health so that they can then support you going forward. And I think we've got a huge responsibility in helping students to feel confident in doing that.

John McLuckie: 17:52

That's a really interesting point about students having the confidence to talk to their employers about mental health and I think there's some evidence that employers are recognising the area of

mental health more now, but do you think there's more that employers need to do in terms of their awareness?

Allie Scott: 18:06

Well, I suppose that's quite a difficult question to answer because no employer's the same but I think that's something we could all do. We don't know it all, we will never know it all because individuals are individuals, and therefore it's important that part of your creating an accepting environment and an environment that safe to learn isn't necessarily just about academic learning. It's about learning as a person and growing and developing as an individual. And I think that we've all got a lot of work to still do around understanding and supporting others. And again, the recognition that that's maybe hard for us too if we're not doing so well ourselves and that that's okay to admit to. So I think there's a whole need for destigmatisation and acceptance and I think just being in the situation where you're able to go actually I need to learn about this and owning that you don't know it all and being okay to ask questions, and be curious and support others and, you know, one of the things I was thinking about that I do quite a lot of work with students around is trying to take away some of the pressures they maybe put on themselves, you know, like perfectionism, or that idea that they've got to come up with novel and new ideas, if they're doing some piece of research, and actually, that they can't just take an idea and sort of try and make that better and these sorts of pressures that I think we're all quite good at putting on ourselves. And I think, again, part of the role of student support and mental health support is helping people to identify when they are doing that, and ways of kind of not putting that pressure on themselves and okay, maybe you didn't get an A plus and you got an A, but actually, you had dinner for the first time this week and you had a really good sleep and you exercised and saw friends and doesn't that feel a little bit better. I think there is something about getting a balance in life. You know, there's something about the student experience is about all aspects of being human, as much as it's all aspects of being a student, you know that you don't leave youness at the door and come in and be a student. It's all part of the same thing. And I think it's really important that we recognise as part of that is our mental health, which on some days may not be as good as others and unfortunately, life events takeover and we're not always in control of when those happen to us and how we will respond to those. And, you know, certainly at the moment, we're all in this situation with COVID and lockdown. None of us have managed to escape that I don't think and so it's about recognising and acknowledging and I think staff and myself have got a huge need to share that that, you know, we're all having to find new ways of coping with life and some days are good and great and others days are really blooming tough and that's okay. And to talk about it, and to share that, I think is key because I think then that helps all of our learners go out into the real world and be authentic people, and be accepting of other people's emotions and feelings and how they are. And that makes for a much more enjoyable workplace experience, you know, and a much more supportive environment to be involved in, in a company and I think that's huge. And, you know, all the sort of things I've seen over the years around successful companies has been about cultures where well-being is supported and there's an open culture of dialogue around what support needs people have, and I think that's critical. So if we can already start to prepare students for that type of dialogue and for being themselves, I think that puts them in a much stronger place to be in the workplace and basic being successful within the careers.

John McLuckie: 21:12

Allie Scott thank you so much for taking part in the podcast and good to talk to you. Thank you.

Allie Scott: 21:17

Thank you very much. Thanks.

John McLuckie: 21:18

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