

# **Student Support Initiative Award 2016**

## **Supporting Online Students with Mental Health Conditions**

Professional experience during the academic year 2014-15 led two members of the research project team to have initial discussions on the need to identify more research and further support for academic staff across UHI who teach online with students who have mental health conditions as we were concerned about the impact the behaviour was having on the students themselves, other students in online classes and also the morale of the staff on the programmes concerned.

Mental health problems are a growing public health concern (Mental Health Foundation, 2015). According to MIND (2016) 1 in 4 people will experience a mental health issue each year. In the 2013 UK Wellbeing Survey nearly 1 in 5 people in the UK aged 16 and older showed symptoms of anxiety or depression (Office for National Statistics, 2015). According to NICE (2011) common mental health conditions include depression, generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.

A report in 2014 by the Equality Challenge Unit suggested that around 0.8% of students in UK higher education have a disclosed mental health condition and this research argues that this represents a significant under-reporting given that it is estimated that 29% of students experience clinical levels of psychological distress. The reason for the specification of online students is because online environments for teaching differ from those face to face. In UHI approximately 16% of students study online.

In a face to face situation, the lecturer can quickly grasp how well the lesson is going by using the students' visual clues and body language as immediate feedback. In an online environment the lecturer only knows how well the students have understood the lecture or tutorial from their writing due to the absence of those visual cues (Park et al, 2013). Park et al (2013) report that the online lecturer needs to be very attentive and aware of individual interests and have an excellent understanding of their students as students.

On-line study can be attractive to those who do not wish to attend face-to-face classes for a variety of reasons, which can include mental health issues. The presentation of mental health difficulties also varies on an individual basis, some are withdrawn, some are in frequent, regular contact, so teasing out the real issues behind behavioural difficulties in an on-line community requires extra sensitivity to changes in patterns and styles of communication.

Mental health conditions by their very nature are to do with the way people think, feel and behave with certain symptoms being common among different mental health conditions and no two people behave exactly the same way when unwell (Mental Health Foundation, n.d). Therefore, there may be exaggerated consequences of studying online with a mental health condition that requires additional support not only for the student but also the academic staff involved.

After support discussions with the local Student Services Manager it was realised that common aspects were emerging also from their perspective. Unpublished data from the local counselling service has shown a gradual increasing trend for the service with over an average of 75% usage rate in terms of slots available and bookings. Supported by a colleague, two members of the team wished to research this aspect further and a paper was written. This paper was published in June 2015 in the Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice highlighting the idea that we would undertake a project across the university with staff involved with online programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level to ascertain levels of knowledge of mental health conditions and to see what experiences they had had in order to further develop existing support mechanisms across the university.

The project aims to answer the following questions:

*Do you feel in your experience that online students with mental health conditions are supported?*

*Do you feel that you know enough about mental health conditions to support online students?*

The overall aim being to further develop university support mechanisms for online students with mental health conditions to allow staff to support the students more comprehensively.

The project involves three stages. The first stage is to carry out data collection with the programme leaders for UHI's undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It was initially proposed that this data collection would be done using semi-structured interviews but because of teaching commitments and other pressures on time this was not possible. So an internet mediated survey was designed using Survey Monkey. Please see the enclosed survey questions.

The second stage of the project involves taking the data collection further by asking online module leaders the same questions but with additions taking on board data collection from the first stage from the programme leaders. The third stage involves asking again the same questions and incorporating data collection from the first two stages but this time asking Personal Academic Tutors. University ethical approval was successfully sought.

This project has been undertaken without funding (so far!) and it is hoped that the research will be reported on in early 2017 with a view that there is clear data from staff as to the direction needed to further support this particular group of students within the university.

## References

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