

Transitioning Students Effectively: Student Led Approach to Mental Health Support

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Report

Transitioning Students Effectively, a student led approach to mental health support, is a £736,000 project funded by the OfS and match funded by the University of Lincoln. It focuses on supporting transitional students as they move from school and college to higher education. The project is led by a core team of thirteen professional services and academic staff, with one group based in Wellbeing carrying out transitional outreach work in schools and colleges and one group based in Digital Student Life producing student led content. Additionally, academic staff from across the university and ten partner organisations are working collaboratively on specific elements of the project. The project is centrally managed and evaluated from within LHERI. To drive the collaborative elements of the project, and to ensure buy in from all stakeholders, an overseeing project Steering Board also has representatives from all project partners including the NHS, Lincolnshire Police, Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln College and Lincolnshire County Council, as well as commercial partner organisations. This also ensures a city wide approach which is a key feature of the project.

Since the commencement of the project in July 2019, a number of student-based activities have taken place. 40 offer holders attended the Wellbeing Orientation Welcome (WOW) residential summer school at the university. All attendees had declared disabilities, including mental health conditions, as part of their UCAS application, and were subsequently invited to the summer school to help prepare them for the start of university. Feedback from both student attendees and caregivers was excellent, and a promotional video was produced by the Digital Project Team. Further funding from the project will ensure that provision for the summer school can be doubled in 2020, with 80 offer holders taking part. The Transitional Wellbeing team have also visited fifteen schools since the start of the project, with ten more visits already booked in for early 2020. The team offer a variety of presentations, ranging from a large assembly style format to smaller bespoke workshops, and the material on offer can be tailored to the particular needs of the school of college being

visited. All sessions focus on the challenges students may face during the transitional period when moving into Higher Education, and are backed up with resources designed by the digital project team. In partnership with the Student Union (SU), Wellbeing Champions have been trained and embedded within the SU's student representation network. SU staff undertook the Student Minds 'Look after your Mate' training, and in turn will train student representatives to support students across the SU network. The digital elements of the project include a partnership with FIKA who developed an emotional fitness app to offer coaching and support to students during transition and beyond. As part of the project, Dr Roger Bretherton, Associate Professor of Psychology recently investigated the effectiveness of the app-based wellbeing intervention on students' psychological wellbeing with 92 student participants (average age 18.4 years) who were randomly allocated between two groups for comparative purposes: Group 1 (n=46) was assigned app-based positive psychology exercises while Group 2 (n=46) was assigned an app-based journaling task. Both groups were instructed to use their assigned apps for five minutes at least three times a week over six weeks. Four psychometric instruments were administered at baseline, 3-week and 6-week intervals. Analysis is currently taken place and results will be disseminated in the next few months. Dr Bretherton is also currently undertaking a small scale trial into Mindfulness Based Strengths Practice (MBSP). Subject to the results, a larger scale trial will then be conducted with the 2020 student intake with the ultimate aim of embedding the practice within the curriculum as part of the project. In addition to the trialling of apps, a wide range of other digital content for social media has been produced, including dedicated content for World Mental Health Day, a focus on men's mental health issues for Movember and Student Stories highlighting a range of difficulties faced by students. A key feature of the project is student co-production and student content creators have been involved in all aspects of the creation of blogs, vlogs and vox-pop videos.

An initial literature review has also been carried out by the project manager. This highlighted a number of factors which affect transitional student wellbeing such as student expectations not matching reality and the psychological wellbeing of transitional students changing rapidly. Key features of interventions were also highlighted, with student led and designed support packages and the avoidance of medicalisation being particularly significant. The current project addresses these issues in a number of ways, with transitional work aiming to increase preparedness and balance expectations of students pre-entry, student cohorts being involved in the trialling of the FIKA app, students being involved in co-production in all areas and all digital content aiming to concentrate on the positive aspects of mental health, avoiding medicalisation.

The project team are acutely aware of the need for robust and meaningful evaluation, with the team based in LHERI taking a lead in steering evaluation. Local level evaluation plans are in place and are already operational, drawing on the Lincoln Impact Evaluation Framework (LIEF). Evaluation plans will be refined in the coming weeks and months to offer more guidance and structure to the project team. Programme level evaluation will also be carried out by the OfS's external evaluation consultants, Wavehill. The University of Lincoln has been assigned a dedicated evaluation contact who will work with the project manager to ensure robust and meaningful evaluation of all aspects of the project. Priorities for 2020 include plans on how to better engage offer holders with the transitional support the project provides, establishing partnership working with LincHigher, cementing evaluation plans and practices and working on sustainability and scaling. The project will run until December 2021, with final evaluation and reporting taking place during the last six months.

Selected references

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