

UCL Chemical Engineering Mental Health Change Makers Report

STAFF: ISOBEL MACKAY, BETH HILLS, SEEMA WALKER, KATIE BREThERICK

STUDENTS: YI HUI LOH, ADAM IZHAM, LANCE SIMANJOENTAK, REBEKAH GOLDWAG

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1. Introduction

In recent years the Department of Chemical Engineering has received large numbers of Extenuating Circumstances claims with students referring to poor mental health and wellbeing. Issues with students' mental health were also raised in the ASER. When discussed in the SSCC student reps mentioned that they are comfortable discussing academic matters with personal tutors, but not anything regarding mental health. In response to this the department have put in a variety of extra provisions, including training several staff members as Mental Health First Aiders and offering wellbeing drop-in sessions with these staff members as well as directly with the departmental tutors. These drop-in sessions are very rarely attended by students so it is clear that this type of provision is also not one that the students are comfortable using, and we want to use this project to determine how we can help students more effectively.

In order to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students in the department of Chemical Engineering it was decided to run a Change Makers project to explore how best we can provide pastoral care to our students, in ways that the students will find the most effective and valuable.

There were two key sections to this project. Firstly, for the student partners to design and run a series of focus groups to canvas the opinions of their peers on the wellbeing provision already in place in the department, and what other provisions they would benefit from. Secondly, the staff and students on the project to get together and analyse the anonymised responses of the focus groups to create a series of recommendations for the department. These recommendations will be presented to the Departmental leadership team and where appropriate acted on and implemented in future academic years, led by the departmental tutor.

1.1 Background Research

Based on the research conducted, many other universities had different methods to deal with student wellbeing. The University of Nicosia had free mental health screening available online, which would identify risks of psychological problems which were confidential, allowing to seek for support. Furthermore, the University of Westminster had used the phone application called "Feeling Good" supposedly used to allow students to enhance mental clarity and focus to reach optimal performance. This displayed the responsibility technology plays in helping with student wellbeing and how universities can make good use of it.

Upon more research, there seemed to be an emphasis on improving communication between academic educators and students. For example, the University of Melbourne held a National Symposium in 2016 on student wellbeing matters. This stimulated conversation on the role of academic educators in supporting mental health and wellbeing of students. This had discussions on crafting an academic curriculum that makes teaching and learning environments that support mental health while enhancing learning. This initiative makes use of feedback from actual students, in the hopes of improving their quality of mental health while studying. Elements of this initiative sparked inspiration for the questions that are to be asked in the focus groups, that will be elaborated in the next section.

2. Focus groups

Three focus groups were conducted, two held on campus and one held online. The dates and times were coordinated to work according to student assessment deadlines to try and encourage student attendance. The focus groups were advertised to all taught students in the department who were required to sign up via an Eventbrite link which was managed by the departmental Student Advisor. Only the student members of the change makers project were in attendance the focus groups to ensure that students felt as comfortable as possible to give their honest thoughts. This is with the exception of Katie Bretherick, the student advisor, who was in attendance in an observatory role so that she could provide appropriate wellbeing support to any student who needed it.

The questions asked to the students in the focus groups were:

1. Who is your first point of contact when you face mental health wellbeing problems?
2. How many times did you meet with him/her/them?
3. What is the most useful support for students who facing mental health wellbeing problem?
4. What were the common topics of discussion when meeting with the person mentioned?
5. Did you feel comfortable discussing your progress, either academic or personal with said person, and if so, what made you feel comfortable about it?
6. If you have met with your _____ this year, how have you found meeting them remotely
7. Which aspect of academic life contribute to stress and how to improve teaching quality to lessen the students' stress?
8. Would you prefer UCL mental support to be online or in person? Any particular reasons why?
9. Are there any activities/programs that you would like to see to improve mental health wellbeing support within the department?
10. Would you prefer speaking to your own peers (students) or a student adviser such as Katie?
11. If you haven't met anybody could you tell us why? (ONLY IF PEOPLE DON'T ANSWER Q1)

2.1 Results

Over the three focus groups there was a total of 8 students who attended, which was lower than hoped, but nevertheless yielded useful discussions with a minimum of 2 students per session. The breakdown of those students was: 2 from year 1, 4 from year 2, 1 from year 3 and 1 from the MSc Global Management of Natural Resources.

The anonymised detailed responses for the focus groups can be found in the appendix. Here we discuss some of the key themes that came out of those discussions.

All participants in the first session (held on May 26) made initial contact with peers, personal tutors, a Bentham representative, a lecturer for a module, and even themselves. Meeting sites of interaction vary in frequency; Some participants in the focus group emphasised that the best way to support them was to have better teaching, as some content is challenging for the person. It appears that the type of support desired is when someone is available to listen to them and make them feel heard. The inability to meet deadlines and the difficulty finding time to exercise, eat, and sleep were topics of conversation between the participants and their initial point of contact. However, participants in session 2 hardly met with first point of contact mentioned in Q1.

In addition, there are problems with visas, missing relatives, and adjusting to a new life abroad. They tended to feel more at ease with a select group of people, primarily younger individuals who are still in school or have recently graduated and completely comprehend how they feel as students. It is simple to establish trust because they appear to offer real-world solutions to their issues. Some people had also remarked that one-on-one interactions with tutors and Bentham representatives are beneficial since they feel a sense of privacy and secrecy.

The delivery of information and the timing of exams appeared to be the main sources of academic stress. Some claimed that the timing of the examinations prevented them from providing answers at their best, leading to ECs, which cause deadlines to overlap, which begins an infinite loop. Many people had complained that the subject was poorly delivered and that it took much longer than expected outside of class to read through textbooks and completely understand some of the ideas. Someone suggested making all of the videos' closed captions available. Some others found it challenging to apply for internships since they were spending so much time studying and finding that there was no end in sight.

People in session1 frequently stated that they valued having both online and offline choices for mental health care, so they could choose either one whenever it was convenient whereas there is one participant from session 2 prefer in person to online. Activities to support mental health included the idea of a suggestion box as a direct feedback channel to the department's upper management; greater integration with the Ramsay Society as the organization's events, such as sporting events and social gatherings, had been quite enjoyable and had most students feeling less stressed. One person said they wished the transition mentor programme had continued into Term 2. Have more art therapy sessions, sporting events (hikes, etc.), and cultural activities. In session 2, participant 2 said more career support should be offered to ensure that students are assured to have a higher probability of attaining a better career in the future.

In general, opinions on whether or not people would want to meet with a student adviser were pretty divided. Although some people felt that their peers were far more friendly and approachable, they understood that there were instances when professional counsel was necessary. Since the student adviser is a new addition to our department, the majority were unaware of its existence.

3. Recommendations

Based on the key findings from the focus groups, and discussions with the change makers students several recommendations were highlighted:

1. Improve communications surrounding support available to students
 - Generally students seemed quite confused about what was available and unaware of a lot of the support present
2. Have more frequent and pro-active check-ins from personal tutors
 - Students often feel they have to reach out and ask for support, and they may feel uncomfortable doing so.
3. Have more occasions for students to build connections with lecturers on a more relatable level
4. Look at the possibilities of expanding the transition mentor programme
5. Have some optional sessions throughout the term on topics like careers, time management, stress management, adjusting to life in the UK etc.

Recommendation 1, to improve communications, was seen to be one of the most important recommendations and so the scope of the project was expanded to target this by determining how we can improve the information presented on the already existing wellbeing moodle page and how we could improve visibility of that. Suggestions for improvements are listed and described below, and these will be implemented by staff ahead of the next academic year.

- Add another tab for anxiety and depression, and provide them a few organizations that provide call and text message, for instance, calm, papyrus etc.
- Add a hotline, like emergency contact for students for instance, got someone suddenly want to commit suicide etc.
- Moves the 'help provided to disability student' to here from the UCL main page
- Tabs to be added: Autism support, 'Let us know if we don't have the service needed by you' and Events Lists
- Change the current image tile used in the current student wellbeing page to "tab" system, which provides all information required upon request
- Moves the "Extenuating Circumstances Form" tab to 'Student Wellbeing Moodle Page'
- Providing a clear link to the Wellbeing page on the page of every assessment so that students know it is there when they might need it the most
- Have a link to the wellbeing moodle page available on the main Chemical Engineering website so that it becomes accessible when googling for support

Appendix – Responses to Focus group questions

A1. Session 1 (on campus)

Questions	Responses
1. Who is your first point of contact when you face mental health wellbeing problems?	<p>A: Has not had much contact with personal tutor since meetings are organized less frequently as 3rd year is reached. Personal tutors do not contact as much. Instead, he found the Bentham rep to be the most supportive, or a professor if the wellbeing issue is academic related. Mentioned that this depends on the relationship with the rep</p> <p>B: Personal Tutor first and asks for opinions on chemical engineering related issues</p> <p>C: Same year course peers or friends</p> <p>D: Lecturer for module related issues and stress, though can find them to be intimidating</p>
2. How many times did you meet with him/her/them?	<p>A: Met Bentham rep once in the year, only after he was already in the thick of it and considered it to be too late. That specific incident, he thought the Bentham rep was purely academic support, but the rep was kind enough to offer wellbeing support- only met him once but was very impactful.</p> <p>B: Met personal tutor around 1-2 times a term in a compulsory meeting but emphasized that he only spoke about his wellbeing once it was too late, and he was burnt out.</p> <p>C: Meets occasionally with tutor but does not bring up any struggles and mental health every time. Talks a few times a week with peers but only brings up wellbeing about once a month</p> <p>D: 2-3 times a year, mainly in relation to problems felt that are associated with being an international student</p>
3. What is the most useful support for students who facing mental health wellbeing problem?	<p>A: When the interaction feels like they genuinely care rather than just because it is their responsibility. Felt only listened to once his problems were escalated to departmental heads</p> <p>B: when results are suggested immediately after a question is raised. Most useful support comes when he feels heard and is shown that the point of contact cares rather than being given a generic message. Go onto askUCL- getting a response a day afterwards is not going to happen- was very stressful with BRP and deadline was close.</p> <p>D: when responses are delivered promptly and are not generic.</p> <p>Giving holding emails- we are considering it and trying to find a solution rather than getting nothing.</p> <p>Overall: all agreed that they want someone to listen to them and to feel heard</p>
4. What were the common topics of discussion when meeting with the person mentioned	<p>B; Does not feel that he is good enough and discusses if it is normal/common to have to neglect basic things such as sleep and exercise in order to complete projects. Sometimes you have everything planned in term 1 and term 2, but then in term 3 you have to neglect other things in your life.</p>

	<p>A: topics included visa, stress related to moving country and living on his own without seeing family as much C: talked about careers with transition mentor D: With peers he said that he tries to be seen as strong. Have lots of things coming at once, struggling to complete the exam in 24 hours- get response of you just need to manage your time better but can you give better advice.</p> <p>Overall: Need time to recover in between exams and projects. Have to work and cook etc. just to barely survive living in London so need recovery time in between.</p>
<p>5. Did you feel comfortable discussing your progress, either academic or personal with said person, and if so, what made you feel comfortable about it?</p>	<p>B: Felt comfortable when it was one on one conversation as gave a sense of privacy D: Feels comfortable in a group and most comfortable when a quick response with practical solutions is given. Said that personal advice built trust C: feels comfortable talking to peers since when people around him are experiencing the same problem it reassures him that he is not unintelligent A: Felt comfortable because the rep was younger- the age thing is a level of comfort because they didn't finish their education so long ago that they don't understand what I'm going through, and he didn't make me feel like I was stupid.</p>
<p>6. If you have met with your _____ this year, how have you found meeting them remotely</p>	<p>Skipped</p>
<p>7. Which aspect of academic life contribute to stress and how to improve teaching quality to lessen the students' stress?</p>	<p>B : Assessments. Scheduling of assessments can cause stress as if not assessing at peak performance it is hard to achieve good results. D : Not exactly getting support from lecturers and experience of lecturers not being encouraging when he had reached out for academic support. Social pressure from peers understanding something that he does not C: Lecturers just reading slides, quality of materials not good A : Find cohort to be 'toxic' sometimes as hard to work together and not supportive to each other. lecture delivery, being top in their field does not mean they are the best as delivering teaching material. Lecture videos are not always good</p>
<p>8. Would you prefer UCL mental support to be online or in person? Any particular reasons why?</p>	<p>D: Both, online should be immediate attention, in person should be quality. B: Both, hard to initiate things when your down, having varied options, easy options. prefers the support to be able to be reached within as little steps as possible. Mentioned a walk-in session being potentially good. A: Online preferably, when you are down its hard to even go out sometimes, online has easier direct attention. C: Both, cater to all. It's about the conversation- so let the student choose whether it's online or in person.</p>

<p>9. Are there any activities/programs that you would like to see to improve mental health wellbeing support within the department?</p>	<p>B: Student suggestions or a suggestion box/ forum C: Ramsoc does a good job, socials and sport events can be implemented to bond and take a break from assessments D: Never heard of RamSoc, small group discussions like this with lecturers A: Something that humanizes the professors and lecturers, have a little session about their own personal journeys, make them closer to the students, making it easier to reach out. Something that humanizes professors more, don't really know them as people, one session at the start of the year where they talk about their academic journey, meet the professors, meet the department etc. Make it easier for people to reach out- if you see them as a person, you can reach out to. D: Expressed wishes for transition mentor to be extended to the 1st term of year 2</p>
<p>10. Would you prefer speaking to your own peers (students) or a student adviser such as Katie?</p>	<p>A: Student adviser personally, need an outside perspective and professional help. Finds peers not always informative enough as they do not know the uni structure despite sometimes useful to talk to people facing the same struggles B: No preference, having both to access having both to access makes it easier to reach out because can decide which is best for you. D: Student adviser, many opinions with peers which gets confusing and muddled. Sometimes peers have conflicting advice to student advisor can be more clear C: Peers, easier to approach, but student adviser is better for privacy especially if problems are related to grades</p>

A2. Session 2 (on campus)

Questions	Responses
<p>1. Who is your first point of contact when you face mental health wellbeing problems?</p>	<p>A: herself - she seeks answers within herself and finds this to be the more convenient way. Only after does she talk to peers and personal tutor B: course friends as they relate more to what she is going through and found personal tutor could not advice much</p>
<p>2. How many times did you meet with him/her/them?</p>	<p>A: When she realizes that she cannot manage it all by herself. B: Checks in with herself all the time or then talk to friends or classmates.</p>
<p>3. What is the most useful support for students who facing mental health wellbeing problem?</p>	<p>A: talking to people who have good communication skills and who are not intimidating. Feels most anxiety before a deadline and so support is more useful then B: Does not want to get to the point where she is feeling anxious. Feels that if teaching support is there from during the learning process, then will not need to reach the point where she feels anxious. Feels support is useful when there is a personal relation with the point of contact which builds a comfortable environment, and when support is given in early stages with non – judgment. Some lecturers use too much jargon and can be difficult to follow.</p>

<p>4. What were the common topics of discussion when meeting with the point of contact</p>	<p>A: All kinds, hard to say that I have mental health issues so usually starts with random points before initiating a conversation. Sometimes we say it's assessments but actually there are other underlying issues that might be affecting our mental health.</p> <p>B: ECs don't always help, now deadlines are overlapping and feel like they aren't good enough- but if we were taught properly in the first place, it would be easier to complete deadlines. Feels that this leads to a downward spiral</p>
<p>5. Did you feel comfortable discussing your progress, either academic or personal with said person, and if so, what made you feel comfortable about it?</p>	<p>A: If the person is listening, then feel comfortable and feel respected. If I say things out loud, then it helps to feel better.</p> <p>B: Not a big sharer so only goes to one person and speak to them, there is a personal connection between them. Reluctant to go to other people as knows they are stressed out so don't want to burden them with her stress sometimes but then once shared it becomes easier.</p>
<p>6. If you have met with your _____ this year, how have you found meeting them remotely</p>	<p>Skipped</p>
<p>7. Which aspect of academic life contribute to stress and how to improve teaching quality to lessen the students' stress?</p>	<p>A: Not knowing who can advise and consult with deciding which PHD to choose from. Does not know where to find this and causes stress.</p> <p>B: Haven't had a proper break- there are deadlines in the holiday and need to apply for internships then, but then lectures during the term. It feels very cramped and rushed and don't have real time to actually learn. Also, because some of the teachers are difficult to understand and don't teach that well, it takes extra time to go through books etc. to understand it. Closed captions could be helpful for some videos where it is hard to understand lecturer.</p>
<p>8. Would you prefer UCL mental support to be online or in person? Any particular reasons why?</p>	<p>B: In person but with personal sessions, international students may find it more comforting to speak to someone with the same language as it is easier for them to express how they feel. Zoom drop-in sessions being a set time, should be more than one day available of these.</p> <p>A: In person, more comfortable with physical session compared to being in front of devices</p>
<p>9. Are there any activities/programs that you would like to see to improve mental health wellbeing support within the department?</p>	<p>B: Art and sports events (hikes outside of the city) which can be very therapeutic, maybe more collaborations with RamSoc to implement socials that do this. . Directly talking about mental health isn't always helpful but art therapy is an outlet.</p> <p>A: Would like it to be simple to join societies and easier to join the events. Does not always want to go to activities as too</p>

	stressed and wants to focus on assessments. Finds activities to be only temporary stress relieving solutions
10. Would you prefer speaking to your own peers (students) or a student adviser such as Katie?	<p>B: did not know what the role of a student advisor was until the focus meeting or that personal tutors make referrals to the student advisor. Haven't tried a student adviser to know whether I would approach them but would try. Found a preference last year to just talk to friends as felt like the department didn't care.</p> <p>A: Prefers to speak to Student Adviser. Finds it to be an outlet when sharing complaints with peers in same position but since all might have the same issues, having external person to talk to can find an outsider solution.</p> <p>B: Other things in life are out of control but academics should be able to control if you study and go through the lectures but isn't the case so that is stressful. Generally, I enjoy studying when you understand but frustrating when the material is not</p> <p>All agreed that it's difficult when during the deadlines, talking to someone isn't going to make the deadline go away, so will feel stressed until it's done.</p>
11. If you haven't met anybody could you tell us why? (ONLY IF PEOPLE DON'T ANSWER Q1)	2 nd year : Just asking people to manage their time

A3. Session 3 (online)

Questions	Responses
1. Who is your first point of contact when you face mental health wellbeing problems?	Participant 1 - Personal tutor Participant 2 - UCL psychology and wellbeing centre
2. How many times did you meet with him/her/them?	Participant 1 - Once only – Talking to tutor about another module, not having weekly or monthly meetings, go to them instead about anything Participant 2 - Once only
3. What is the most useful support for students who facing mental health wellbeing problem?	Participant 1 - Useful for 1 to 1 meeting Participant 2 - UCL Psychology and wellbeing is extremely helpful, good point where you need to talk to someone

<p>4. What were the common topics of discussion when meeting with the person mentioned</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Very general topics, talking about academics Participant 2 - Quite general, telling them about current problems, providing students with a couple of options to choose when giving solutions, they (Student) managed to talk about workload</p>
<p>5. Did you feel comfortable discussing your progress, either academic or personal with said person, and if so, what made you feel comfortable about it?</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Felt comfortable, probably because they (Student) met with their tutor more often as they (Tutor) taught one of the other modules Participant 2 - Felt comfortable as well as they could talk about any topics, will provide help instead of judging (From Psychology, they provided therapy programmes, where everyone can take part in the programme anytime and anywhere) - Found out through searching up (Students psychological and counselling services) (Did it remotely, did not harder in any way to express feelings as they are professional)</p>
<p>6. If you have met with your _____ this year, how have you found meeting them remotely</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Not sure as they have not gone through mental health issues but guesses that in person is better Participant 2 - Both is all right for her as they do not feel a difference</p>
<p>7. Which aspect of academic life contribute to stress and how to improve teaching quality to lessen the students' stress?</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Short deadlines but nothing much they can do about it Participant 2 - Workload is much spread out and feels like she does not learn much from the course this year, most of the stress coming from outside academic life (Things such as part time jobs and tutoring's)</p>
<p>8. Would you prefer UCL mental support to be online or in person? Any particular reasons why?</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Personally, prefers online, so that it reduces travelling Participant 2 - In person is hard for people who live far from campus so online is preferred</p>
<p>9. Are there any activities/programs that you would like to see to improve mental health wellbeing support within the department?</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Activities/events to reduce the stress rather than therapeutic stuff Participant 2 - Not really as it is more of wanting to give students the assured feeling to find a good career rather than mental health support</p>
<p>10. Would you prefer speaking to your own peers (students) or a student adviser such as Katie?</p>	<p>Participant 1 - Student adviser, would be able to give more solutions to the problem Participant 2 - Adviser is more helpful as well as it is more professional</p>
<p>11. If you have not met anybody could you tell us why? (ONLY IF PEOPLE DON'T ANSWER Q1)</p>	<p>N/A</p>