

Mind the Mind: mental health first aid training and cultural change in HE

The Context of Mental Health

Mental ill health is on the increase and has been widely reported as a key international and national concern (Patel et al., 2011; Care Quality Commission, 2017; MHFA England, 2016). Mental ill health has a significant impact across the university sector for staff and students, with anxiety, depression and panic attacks (Thomas, 2014) the most common experiences. It is well publicised that stigma and discrimination are the main factors that influence limited disclosure of mental health issues (MHFA England, 2010) which contributes to Stevenson and Farmer's (2017: 5) conclusion that the 'UK faces a significant mental health challenge at work'. However, Stevenson and Farmer (2017) also identify that with the adoption of their recommendations, demonstrable improvements can be seen, within a ten-year timeframe.

Mental Health at the University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham has one of the highest rates of staff absence related to mental health issues across the sector (UCEA, 2017 data). Mental health issues accounted for 23% of staff sickness absence in the 2016 – 2017 academic year and at 72.8%, the main cause of long terms sickness (over 20 days of absence) is mental health issues. Staff accessing University counselling services has increased over the past eight years with 262 requiring this support in the 2016 – 2017 academic year. The recent Staff Engagement Survey further highlighted issues connected with well-being more generally with only 30% agreeing that the University cares about their well-being.

Developing mental health issues is also a risk for the student population (Thorley, 2017). Within the Nottingham Campus community, student demand for university counselling services has more than doubled since 2012. Since that date, 2, 520 students have accessed this service with 700 students seeking support for mental health issues in the 2016 – 2017 academic year. Evidence (MHFA England, 2016) suggests that this may only be the tip of the iceberg given the high numbers of individual who do not disclose their mental ill health difficulties or access appropriate support.

Hughes et al. (2018) highlight the need for the sector to 'consider the role played by academics within a whole university approach to student mental health' (4), ensuring boundaries are clear to both staff and students and stressing the need to upskill university staff in their awareness of mental health. Universities that have engaged with the MHFA training and rolled out a programme of mental health training and support initiatives have seen demonstrable impact particularly in relation to cultural change (see <https://mhfaengland.org> for case study information).

The University has adopted a pro-active approach in tackling this issue. Following the training of 12 staff members as mental health first aid trainers, a programme of training has taken place with over 200 staff and students now being trained as mental health first aiders since January 2018.

The Research

Utilising the robust evidence-based programme established by Mental Health First Aid England, this project has the following overarching aims:

- ❑ Reduce stigma and discrimination associated with mental health illness across the University community;
- ❑ Successfully deliver a Mental Health First Aid training programme across the university;
- ❑ Develop a Mental Health First Aider Network to support on-going institutional attention to and support of mental health;
- ❑ Establish clearly identified MHFA communities of practice in each Faculty and across Professional Services teams.

Concurrently to the delivery of the training, the research project seeks to explore the experiences of those involved with the project in both trainer and participant roles with the following research questions framing the research element of the work:

- Does the delivery of a mental health first aider programme reduce stigma and discrimination associated with mental ill health?
- What experiences do trainers have when delivering the mental health first aid course that can inform the development of an institutional strategy?
- How effectively does the mental health first aid programme prepare staff when dealing with students experiencing mental health issues?

Methodological Approach

Much research in this area is quantitative in nature, identifying the prevalence of experiences across different mental health issues. This paper takes up a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of staff who have trained as mental health first aiders and instructors. Creswell (1998) views qualitative research as an 'intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colours, different textures, and various blends of material' where the fabric 'is not explained easily or simply' (Creswell, 1998:13). Thus the methods used within this research seek to uncover the complexities of staff experiences as they deliver the mental health first aid programme and also how the skills learned are put to use in their professional work with students. In order to explore this issue, the following methods were used: course evaluation questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions (200 completions); focus group discussions (four); individual interviews (12).

This research complies with the code of practice for the conduct of educational research as provided by the British Education Research Association. Qualitative data was thematically analysed and the following themes emerged:

- Increased confidence
- Training is invaluable
- Understanding boundaries
- Unanticipated issues

Quantitative data is reported as frequency scores.

Preliminary Findings

Data is still in the process of being analysed, but tentative findings illuminate the positive benefits of the programme delivery to date.

The delivery of the course has been positively received by the majority of participants with most stating that they felt more confident dealing with a colleague experiencing mental ill health than prior to the course. Those that reported no change in respect to this, had prior training in counselling and were using the skills in their roles already. A number of participants stated that they had found the training invaluable with one participant commenting that they hoped the course '*would become as common place as physical first aid*'. Participants also found the framework provided in the training useful in dealing with students experiencing mental health issues with one stating '*[I] really found the boundaries useful – which will help in practice when dealing with students*'. Interestingly, there were a number of unanticipated issues that the course raised when being delivered. Some individuals who had experienced mental ill health either previously or currently, raised concerns about the '*ablist*' nature of the course and objected to activities that they believed '*trivialised*' some mental health issues. This has prompted the group of trainers to carefully consider the ways in which specific activities are set up and to emphasise the importance of self-care already embedded within the course. In

addition, some individuals believed that the course evaluation questions assumed levels of judgment towards mental ill health amongst the participants, therefore expecting participation in the course to reduce this.

Findings illustrate the positive benefits of embarking on a university-wide programme of mental health first aid training. Within the scope of the project is to develop case studies to capture cultural change across the University. This will be undertaken in the next phase of the research and reported at the conference.

References

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