

## **G11.2 Denbigh 2 Thursday 6 December 9.00 - 11.00**

### ***Fostering Student Mental Health in the Context of Personal Tutoring (0271)***

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**Presentation overview:** In this presentation, attendees will be presented with collated findings from a number of recent projects exploring the experiences of personal tutors in handling student mental health. These projects include: 1) a recent report from Student Minds, which explored the role and experiences of academics handling student mental health; 2) the ongoing Raising Awareness Raising Aspirations (RARA) project, exploring the role of personal tutoring in narrowing attainment gaps for Black and Minority Ethnic students and students from Low Socio-Economic Backgrounds (LSEBS); and 3) preliminary findings from a RARA sub-project exploring student transitions to HE and their experiences of social connectedness and mental health (the Transitions project). By presenting findings from a diverse range of projects, attendees will be encouraged to identify reoccurring themes regarding the role of personal tutoring in the context of student mental health. Attendees will also be presented with the latest recommendations and implications emerging from these projects and will be encouraged to critique the feasibility of implementing these recommendations across the sector.

**Background:** Despite education previously acting as a buffer against poor psychological health, today, students are more likely to drop-out of Higher Education (HE) due to poor mental health than ever before (Levine, 2017). Even students who graduate, do so with lower levels of psychological health that do not return to pre-entry levels (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010). In the UK, the introduction of new policies has changed the make-up of the student body and the types of distress they experience and these factors, in turn, impact on students' ability to feel socially connected, on their sense of belonging and on their willingness to seek help. Personal tutors help students feel that they have someone on their course who knows them, is looking out for them, and is a friendly face that students can approach. However, increasing demands on academics and student support services, influence whether students seek (and receive) professional help. These combined changings have created an 'invisible frontline' and today, responding to student mental health has become an inevitable part of the academic role.

**Aims:** The primary aim of this paper is to encourage attendees to critique recent recommendations to better support academics in their role of supporting student mental health. The secondary aim of this paper is to encourage attendees to reflect on their own experiences and to identify the skills they use to handle difficult conversations about student mental health.

**Methods:** This paper uses a mixed-methods design to capture the experiences of students and staff, from a diverse group of universities and faculties, and across three research projects. The methods used across the projects presented in this paper include: semi-structured interviews with academics, personal tutors and students (Student Minds project); focus groups with personal tutors and students (RARA project); and a repeated cohort survey design with first year undergraduate students capturing their expectations, experiences and satisfaction of their social relationships, the academic difficulty of their course, and their mental health (Transitions project). The content of the Student Minds interviews specifically explored academics' experiences of handling student mental health issues and their views on the level of training support available to them to support this aspect of their role. The focus groups with students and personal tutors in the RARA project explore the role and value of a personal tutor in its broadest context and role that personal tutoring plays in

narrowing attainment gaps for BME and LSEB students. Finally, the survey in the Transitions project consists of the validated Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) by Lee and Richards (1995), which measures components of belongingness proposed by self-psychology theory (Kohut, 1984). The survey also includes the only clinical outcome measure designed to measure student mental health – the Counseling Center Assessment of Psychological Symptoms (Locke et al., 2011), which was recently validated for use in the UK (Broglia, Millings, & Barkham, 2017).

**Results:** Thematic analysis was to identify key themes from interviews and focus groups with students and staff across the Student Minds project and RARA project. Thematic analysis of RARA data was additionally co-produced by project students and researchers. Preliminary analysis of survey data is descriptive and correlational. Overlapping findings from the three projects will be presented alongside key recommendations, which attendees will be encouraged to review and critique.

**Conclusions:** Merged findings suggest that supporting student mental health is now an inevitable, yet invisible, part of the academic/personal tutoring role that is not sufficiently supported, valued or recognised by the wider institution. Staff feel that the HE sector does not have the appropriate structures or cultures in place to assist academics and staff feel disconnect from student services. To address these challenges, a series of longer-term developments are needed in the sector and a ‘whole university approach’ is needed to better support students and academics. Preliminary findings from the Transitions study highlight important links between students’ social connectedness, academic satisfaction and mental health and support the notion that forming social relationships could contribute to protecting students against poor psychological health.

## References:

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