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Wolstencroft, Peter  and Simmons, Lisa (2024) All together now: How mental health support for university in the North West of England is being reframed. BERA Blog.

Publisher: British Educational Research Association

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is the accepted manuscript of a blog post which appeared on BERA Blog.

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All Together Now – how mental health support is being reframed in Higher Education

There are days that resonate with a whole nation; for the French, *le quatorze juillet* is forever Bastille Day, whilst for Americans, the fourth Thursday in November represents Thanksgiving. In Canada, there is a new date etched into the national conscientiousness. Bell Let's Talk Day takes place at the end of January and is a national campaign designed to eliminate the stigma attached to talking about mental health. It attempts to change the narrative by encouraging people to talk to those closest to them to check if there are any problems. Rather than something that was the preserve of experts, mental health support became something that included everyone.

In British Higher Education, the issue of mental health occupies the thoughts of many people. The latest figures suggest that almost 30,000 university students reported problems with their mental health (OfS 2023) and this figure has increased significantly since the pandemic (Campbell *et al* 2022). The suicide of a number of students and subsequent criticisms of the universities that they attended (Guardian 2023) has also given increased attention to the subject with organisations seeking to increase the support available to students.

Ensuring that all students have the mental health support they need is problematic given there are almost 3 million students in the sector (HESA 2023). In addition, the diversity of the student population creates a situation where 'one size fits all' approaches struggle to cope with the varied needs encountered. They also rely on students reaching out to them, rather than a proactive approach that monitors students during their studies.

Two faculties at Manchester Metropolitan University, Business and Law and Science and Engineering are piloting a new approach to mental health. Although the combined student numbers tops 16,000 a key principle stresses the importance of the individual student journey through their studies. This is reflected in the approach taken to the support of students' mental health where a reframing of the narrative has occurred. Instead of the onus being on the students to visit the support services, an approach is being embedded that casts mental health as being the responsibility of everyone and hence, students have access to support when they need it.

The drivers for this change have been the increased number of students needing support, the desire to supplement the excellent central support available and also the changing relationship between university and student body. The greater understanding that students focus on personal relationships when studying, whether this is with a personal tutor, or a member of staff they feel a particular connection with, means that there is a far greater need for everyone to understand the issues affecting students. This is not to say that everyone is cast in the role of expert; instead the strategy focuses on raising awareness and making sure that the mental health of students at university is the responsibility of everyone and as with the Bell Let's Talk campaign, removing any stigma associated with it.

To help facilitate this approach, all students are invited to take the St John's Mental Health and Wellbeing Certificate. This certificate is incentivised with the opportunity to claim credit and whilst that might act as an initial driver, the evidence from evaluations collected from the Faculty of Science and Engineering where 800 students would have completed the programme by the end of the semester, suggests that participants both enjoy the experience and gain a great deal from completing the certificate. Alongside the student-centred programme, academics are encouraged to attend a parallel programme that raises awareness of the issue and helps them make the right choices as to where to signpost students for support as well as recognising the signs of students in need of help.

The approach taken has changed the narrative around the subject and also led to a far greater awareness of the issues surrounding mental health. Whereas before students had to reach out to receive the support they needed, now they are surrounded by people who have greater awareness of the subject and hence can check in on them. This introduction of a two-way communication process means that the support is far more immediate than before and the maxim 'Let's Talk' has become something that is not just confined to Canada.

References

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Contributors

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