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Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

Consistency, nurture and relationship building: three key ingredients for supporting engagement and maximising progress on a placement based undergraduate degree

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This case study will focus on the impacts of positive mental wellbeing support within the BA Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) degree at the University of Greenwich. The 2020-2021 cohort of undergraduates was the first to be supported by the same year lead throughout their degree. This approach has resulted in a 96% overall satisfaction rating in the 2021 National Student Survey (NSS) survey, and 47% of students achieving a first-class honours degree, and 70/76 moving into a teaching post on degree completion. This case will offer the reader ideas and approaches that could be replicated across other subject areas and disciplines within the HE sector.

What we do

Across their studies, the BA students engage in a wide variety of university taught sessions where they critique educational theory, whilst developing specific subject knowledge. Alongside this, a programme of guest lectures and talks are arranged by the year lead which reflects the interests and needs of the cohort. For example: Adobe training, The Holocaust Education Trust, support for teaching abroad, introduction to the Roma Gypsy Community, LGBTQ+ representations in children's picture books, non-binary teachers sharing their experiences and headteachers offering advice. By the end of their degree, the students complete a total of four placements - one within an alternative educational setting, such as a museum or teaching abroad in our international partnership schools. The remaining three placements are based within a primary school setting and range from 6-8 weeks. Student comments on the NSS responses highlighted how the programme has "set me up extremely well for my future endeavours."

Historically, students have been supported by a consistent personal tutor who they meet once a term. Whilst on placement the students also receive support from a school-based mentor and a School Experience Tutor (SET) from the University. Collectively these individuals can identify any support that a student may require whilst on placement.

When the class of 2021 began, a decision was made to add an additional layer of consistency to their experience, meaning that I would be their year lead throughout their studies. To develop a trusting and caring relationship with the students, I would send a weekly email with notifications, announcements and reminders. Furthermore, I would personalise it so that the students and staff were at the heart of the email; from the arrival of newborn babies, to climbing Mount Everest and achieving PhDs, we celebrated each achievement as a university family. Subsequently, we started to grow a community of learners who began to develop greater connections with each other.

In the second year of study, I also included a feature where every student was invited to recommend a children's picture book to the cohort. I believe this proved beneficial for both the individual sharing the book, and their fellow students, as it helped to expand their knowledge of children's literature - key knowledge for the success of their placement. One student recently emailed me saying, "I really miss your weekly emails, can you keep sending them as they always made me feel good and give me great ideas to use in class." This was further evidence that the weekly communications were supporting both their wellbeing and their placement successes. After the first year of study I felt as though I knew the cohort of 76 students more as individuals, beyond simply connecting a name to a face. Feedback suggests this made them feel valued, appreciated and seen. This small but impactful act helped to build a trusting relationship between us, one where they felt safe enough to offer feedback, make suggestions and ask for help when needed. As one student said, "having a consistent year lead throughout the three years has really benefitted the students and she knows each and every one of us individually and is always there to help us out."

Covid response

Between their second and third years of study, this cohort was impacted by COVID-19, where much of their learning was moved online. During this period, I took the time to personally email 10 students a week, checking in with them and monitoring their levels of emotional health. My email contained tips about supporting their wellbeing and some useful non-academic, but nourishing resources for the mind, body and soul, some of which included podcast recommendations, meditation ideas, artistic inspirations and links to websites offering free wellbeing support. Many students were incredibly appreciative of this personalised communication.

In January 2021, four days before their third and final placement, an increase in COVID-19 cases sent the country into a national lockdown with all schools moving to online learning, and only remaining open for vulnerable and key worker children. This cohort of students had yet another hurdle to overcome. For many students they had to quickly learn how to adapt their pedagogy, finding engaging ways to teach 3-11 years online, and for others they became front line workers teaching in school every day. Understandably, this took a huge toll on their emotional resilience, and as a team we felt the need for additional wellbeing support. Most students were able to virtually meet their SET weekly, which proved highly beneficial and enabled us to detect any issues that needed further support. In addition to this, I also held weekly online 'Chat with Kat' sessions at the same time each week. These were very informal, normally starting with a quick check, sometimes this was an emoji in the chat, or a two-word check-in, and some weeks it was a highlight from the previous week. Feedback from one student stated: "The weekly Teams meeting which everyone in the cohort can join, are just for the students to speak, whether it be university focused or just for a chat. It has definitely helped me throughout the pandemic, seeing different faces and being able to have a little chat and get things off my chest."

Evidence of impact

The NSS result for overall satisfaction for this cohort of students was 96% - a staggering 21.9% higher than the national average (74.09%) and was among the best course outcomes within the University. The Vice-Chancellor stated that the comments were the best in the University, and the Student Union acknowledged how amazing the comments were around supporting students with their mental wellbeing. In addition to this, 92% of students received a 2:1 or above, and 47% of these received a first-class honours degree, with 70/76 securing a teaching post. It goes without saying there have been many influential factors that have enabled these impressive graduate outcomes; however, it cannot be denied that by having a consistent year lead, who has held a tight focus on nurturing student mental wellbeing and building relationships, has had a significant impact on their engagement in the programme, as well as

their degree outcomes. Within the NSS feedback comments, one student explained that “university has really helped me develop as a person, building my knowledge and skills, preparing me to begin work. I've learnt a lot about myself through this experience and this learning will support me throughout my career.” When you take the time to learn about your students as individuals, treat them as colleagues and support their wellbeing before monitoring and stretching their academic abilities, you help them to better understand themselves as individuals. When they develop a better understanding of themselves as individuals, they can fully commit to their studies and have far better chances at excelling in their chosen careers, as well as living more fulfilled lives.

This document was produced as part of the [Collaborative Enhancement Project - Embedding Mental Wellbeing](#).