

AMOSSE Insight projects 2015/16



The impact of mindfulness in enhancing student resilience

Lancaster University's project investigates the impact of mindfulness training on student resilience, while evaluating three established approaches to delivering the mindfulness training.



Developing disability awareness in Student Services staff

The Falmouth Exeter Plus project identifies good practice for increasing disability awareness and embedding anticipatory reasonable adjustments across student support functions, by evaluating the effectiveness and impact of three blended-learning methods.



International approaches to disabled student support

The University of Worcester project explores the different models of support offered by international higher education providers to students with support needs based on their disability or medical condition.



INSIGHT

learning • sharing • enabling

About AMOSSHE Insight

AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation, is committed to a research agenda led by our members' priorities, to support professional development and broaden the evidence base for student services in the UK. AMOSSHE is keen to support our members' project work in order to share innovative research, expertise and good practice across the Student Services sector, and enable continuing development and improvement.

These short, focused pieces of research address topics of interest to Student Services practitioners and include intended outcomes that have potential for sector-wide impact or application.

This is the purpose and goal of **AMOSSHE Insight**: to develop and share insights for the benefit of all members.

About the 2015/16 projects

In 2015/16 AMOSSHE commissioned three small projects from member organisations as part of **AMOSSHE Insight**.

Here are the projects AMOSSHE funded in 2015/16:

- **Developing disability awareness in Student Services staff** (Falmouth Exeter Plus)
- **International approaches to disabled students' support** (University of Worcester)
- **The impact of mindfulness in enhancing student resilience** (Lancaster University)

You can find summaries of each of the projects in this document, and more details about them online at www.amoshe.org.uk/projects

Developing disability awareness in Student Services staff

Falmouth Exeter Plus



Principal investigator
Anita Thomas, Head of accessibility and inclusive learning

Total award from AMOSSHE
£3,500

Falmouth
Exeter
Plus

Project title: Developing disability awareness in Student Services' staff – an evaluation of blended learning approaches

Overview

This project aims to understand the most effective blended learning approach to disability awareness training, measured by impact on knowledge gain and practical application of learning.

The UK government's modernisation of Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) and the associated reductions in the funding for individual disabled students is placing a sector-wide pressure on higher education providers to ensure that they are:

- Providing inclusive services in an accessible environment, including inclusive teaching and learning.
- Fully meeting their statutory duty to make reasonable adjustments, including the duty to make anticipatory adjustments.

Falmouth Exeter Plus and its key stakeholder partner universities (Falmouth University and University of Exeter) have responded to the DSA changes by proactively building organisational capacity and capability to enhance both accessibility and the level of inclusive practices. This is founded in the belief that making both the environment and how services are delivered more inclusive will result in less need for multiple individual adjustments to compensate for lack of accessibility. As part of this wider strategic response, this project evaluates the effectiveness of three blended learning methods to increase both disability awareness and knowledge of the practical implications of the anticipatory reasonable adjustments' duty.

Project aims

This project aims to identify good practice for increasing disability awareness and embedding anticipatory reasonable adjustments across student service functions. The primary project aims are to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of three blended learning methods for increasing disability awareness / confidence across Student Service functions, measured by impact on knowledge gain and practical application of learning.
- Collate and disseminate good practice guidelines for higher education providers on effective blended learning methods for increasing disability awareness and enabling effective transfer of learning.

Transfer of learning will be expressly focused on enhancing the accessibility and inclusiveness of university services, including teaching and learning.

Methodology

The project adopted a predominantly qualitative approach to data collection, undertaking the following activity:

- Knowledge survey of blended learning participants prior to, and following, the key knowledge-gain learning intervention.
- Survey of students to measure and evaluate feedback on the accessibility and inclusiveness of university services and confidence in staff disability awareness prior to, and at least three months after, the learning interventions.
- Survey of individuals and case study areas to identify changes in practices and policies at intervals of three and six months following the different learning intervention(s).



- Review and analysis of documentation and data.

The core elements of the blended learning methods included:

- Specific knowledge training (either face-to-face or by use of an e-learning module or equivalent open learning programme). Knowledge gain was assessed by asking participants to complete 12 questions before and at the end of the training.
- Helpline advice to participants following completion of the training to facilitate transfer of learning.

Two of the blended learning methods included an action planning meeting following the knowledge training. This meeting explored how the principles covered in the training could be applied in practice in participants' professional areas, leading to agreed planned actions.

Key findings

There was significant organisational support for the project. This was reflected in high participation rates in the blended learning. Over 95% of the invited staff undertook the initial eight programmes.

There was no significant difference in knowledge gain across the different blended learning methods. The average knowledge gain across all methods was significant, with an average pre-training score of 5.3 and post-training score of 10.8.

A significant early finding is that where staff took part in a facilitated action planning meeting following the knowledge training, there has been increased evidence of actual or planned changes in practice or policy. This suggests that a formal process for proactively discussing how learning can be applied in participants' work areas increases the likelihood that training leads to practical and evidenced changes.

Key findings from the student survey include:

- 51% of students believed that their lecturers and tutors have a good understanding of disability, with a similar percentage believing this was true for staff working in other areas of Student Services.
- Just over 45% of students believed that their lecturers and tutors make adjustments for

students with disabilities, with this increasing to just over 52% for staff working in other areas of Student Services.

- When students were asked to rate possible areas of focus for improving accessibility and inclusion, over 98% of students rated "making teaching and learning more accessible and inclusive" as important, with over 56% rating this as very important. Over 97% of students rated "providing mandatory disability awareness training for all staff" as important, with over 53% rating this as extremely important.

This valuable student feedback will be an important part of the wider institutional plans to improve accessibility and inclusion. In addition, the plan is to re-survey students in six months to monitor and measure the impact of the interventions to build disability awareness.

The project has demonstrated that levels of knowledge gain do not appear to significantly vary, irrespective of which blended learning method is used. In contrast, initial findings suggest that where an objective of learning is to change practice or policy, this likelihood appears to increase where blended learning includes facilitated action planning following the formal knowledge training.

Recommendations

Three key recommendations from the project are:

- Offering a helpline / contact facility as part of a blended learning approach provides practical support that helps enable staff to talk through any questions after the knowledge training, including how the knowledge gained can be practically applied.
- Involving students in pre- and post-learning surveys can assist in shaping priorities for action (linked to the training content) and quantifying student perception of changes in practice.
- Ensuring that blended learning includes a formal opportunity to action plan how the learning gained can be practically applied in learners' work areas is key to learning being a tool for transformation.

International approaches to disabled students' support

University of Worcester



Principal investigators
Patrick Clark, Specialist Learning Support Service Manager

Total award from AMOSSHE
£3,483



Project title: 'Supporting the needs of disabled students in higher education – a comparative study of disability support in international higher education institutes (HEIs)'

Overview

At a time of considerable change in funding for academic support arrangements for disabled students, HEIs in England are looking at the pros and cons of different models and methods of support, the costs involved and how and where to best implement changes to their current provision. There is already considerable best practice and innovation nationally, and this is helpful in informing this process. However, as the majority of HEIs in the UK operate within the existing funding regime for disability support in higher education, delivered through Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA), it is difficult to gain a clear understanding of how support might be delivered in environments where external funding for disability support is different or more scarce, and whether there are any genuine alternatives to the current practice. In addition, there is no currently available review of the literature addressing these approaches both internationally and in the UK. It is therefore advantageous to draw on the experience of HEIs in other countries that share the commitment to enabling disabled students to achieve in higher education whilst operating within different financial and policy environments.

Project aims

Using the University of Worcester's existing contacts with over 39 HEIs internationally, this small research project sought to look at different models of support offered by a selection of these (and other carefully selected institutions) to students with a range of disability support needs.

The study reviewed the existing literature in this area, highlighting different practice and models of support that might in future be explored in greater depth, with a view to offering a range of alternative models for adoption by HEIs across the UK.

Due to the potential scale of the research, the study focussed on those elements of support that are most topical for the University of Worcester and other HEIs in the UK in the light of changes to funding for disability support in higher education. These were:

- In-class support for students with a disability (including note-taking / lecture capture).
- Exam support and alternative assessment opportunities.
- The use of assistive and other technology to support disabled students in class and examination situations.
- Additional specialist academic support for students who require additional support (including, but not exclusive to, the one-to-one academic support currently funded through DSA).

Methodology

The multi-method research study included a literature search, internet review, online surveys for HEIs and students, and a small number of semi-structured interviews conducted through Skype.

Key findings

Evidence of disability is almost universally required in order for students to access support, though examples exist of a move towards a more social model of addressing the barriers faced by disabled students in higher education.

Models of support vary, but some less costly



accommodations, such as in-class support and exam arrangements, tend to be common across most HEIs and international boundaries.

Innovative practice, or practice that is significantly different to some of the traditional models in the UK, is hard to find, though among international HEIs there is a different emphasis on student-led support, group support and inclusive practice / universal design, which is worthy of discussion. Though legislation does play a role, the emphasis of support and the types of resources allocated to it also seem strongly influenced by the ethos of the HEI.

The study found some key similarities between UK and international practice. The research suggests that the range of accommodations and support available to students in class in different countries tends to be broadly similar to those that might be expected in the UK. These include use of voice recording devices, tablets / laptops, handouts / notes in advance, lecture capture and radio aids, plus additional specialist support such as signers, manual note-takers and practical support.

This pattern is replicated when looking at exam support, with extended time, more frequent breaks, separate rooms, access to scribes and use of PCs common practice across the study.

Though some similarities can be seen across HEIs in different countries, these are largely based on accommodations that can be made for students at low cost. Where greater levels of funding burden exist (for human support, for example) there is an increasing divergence between traditional funded support models in the UK and those in other countries.

Some practice was identified by the research that differs from the standard models of support offered in the UK (though it is accepted that some or all of these may already be being adopted, to varying degrees, by different HEIs in the UK). Two of these areas are:

- Approaches to in-class support and note-taking vary greatly, and sometimes vary within countries / states depending on the ethos of the different HEIs. Peer note-taking, which involves notes being taken by paid or volunteer classmates, is a popular model, particularly in the US, and is one

of the main alternatives to paid “professional” support workers. However, there are no evaluative studies of the effectiveness of peer notetaking, and the research suggests that there are some inherent flaws in this approach.

- Another difference is that specialist tutoring is rarely funded by HEIs to the extent it is funded by DSA in the UK. Several HEIs in the study had specialist tuition available for disabled students, predominantly those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), with some HEIs providing student funded programmes of specialist support. However, the predominant model in the findings is of HEI support being delivered as a part of more generic learning support / study skills support services. Again, the research was unable to uncover any meaningful evidence of impact (negative or positive) of these different models.

The findings of this project constitute just a toe in the water of a vast topic, and as such, though the authors feel that the findings have some merit, there is still a long way to go in truly exploring the pros and cons of various alternatives to the current fairly standardised model of disability support in UK higher education. There is some commonality of approach, but where access to external resources to fund support is an issue, differences begin to emerge in both the type and scale of support options, seemingly based on the particular ethos and priorities of the HEI.

Recommendations

- UK Student Services departments and disability teams should note these findings and contribute to the further investigation and evaluation of some of the models identified within it.
- Further research should be undertaken to engage students with experience of disability support in the UK and abroad, to better understand how students feel about the different models of support available and what impact this has on their studies at university.
- Further research should be undertaken to explore some of the themes emerging from this project in greater detail, including further exploration and evaluation of peer note-taking schemes (both voluntary and paid).

The impact of mindfulness in enhancing student resilience

Lancaster University



Principal investigator
Claire Povah, Head of Strategic Development, Student Services

Total award from AMOSSHE
£2,400



Project title: 'Student resilience and mindfulness'

Overview

Research suggests that mindfulness-based programmes can play an important role in helping students manage stress, decrease rumination and increase self-compassion. In essence, the suggestion is that mindfulness-based programmes can improve overall psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, several studies have assessed mindfulness as a means to increase resilience. However, despite this research mindfulness-based programmes are not yet widely embedded into the higher education structure of the UK.

The project at Lancaster University looked to evaluate three approaches to developing student resilience, and the impact of these in developing the personal resilience of the student participants.

Project aims

The Lancaster University project aimed to engage students in developing their personal resilience in ways that they could apply to their studies, their health and wellbeing, and future employability.

The project offered students three courses aimed at increasing resilience:

- One online mindfulness MOOC (Massive Open Online Course).
- One face-to-face mindfulness programme.
- One online resilience coaching course.

By measuring resilience scores pre- and post-intervention, the project aimed to assess the most effective method of delivering resilience-building interventions to the student population at Lancaster University.

Methodology

The project was a small scale, empirical study, which was informed by a review of the current literature and an understanding of the most effective resilience measures. Primary and secondary research was undertaken using the following activities:

- Review of the literature relevant to mindfulness for resilience.
- Initial survey of student participants asking them to self-report any mental health issues and rate their perceived level of stress in relation to ten areas of life.
- Resilience questionnaire, the CD-RISC-25 measure of resilience sent to all student participants.

The project was led by a researcher who is experienced in running questionnaires and analysing data. The project team also have experience of running and evaluating such initiatives.

Students were invited by email to sign up for one of three mindfulness courses, namely:

- Face-to-face mindfulness course delivered by an in-house provider.
- Online mindfulness MOOC, run by Monash University, Australia (Mindfulness for Wellbeing and Peak Performance).
- Online resilience coaching course (in-house provider).

Students who responded were sent an online survey that asked them to self-report any mental health issues and rate their perceived level of stress in relation to ten areas of life (based on a survey by Student Minds: www.studentminds.org.uk). They were then invited to complete a resilience questionnaire



(the CD-RISC-25 measure of resilience). The students were also asked to describe what resilience meant to them. Students also completed the resilience questionnaire post-course.

Ethical issues concerning data collection, storage and presentation were addressed, and all questionnaire responses were anonymised.

Key findings

The number of participants engaging throughout all stages of the research was small, so the results are not generalisable. However, the research did demonstrate the following within the sample group:

- Mindfulness training does correlate with an increase in resilience, but this was only statistically significant in this study for the online mindfulness course (MOOC).
- Student resilience generally appears to be low compared with other populations who have responded to the same test.
- The highest causes of perceived stress amongst the student participants were academic workload, time management and future plans.
- In general, respondents had a good awareness of the principles of resilience.
- An inverse correlation between self-reported mental health issues and resilience score.

- Higher resilience scores for those who engaged most with the intervention, regardless of the mindfulness course undertaken.
- Those who found the courses most useful showed the greatest increase in resilience scores.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this small-scale research, the project team would recommend the following:

- A larger comparative study of the benefits of mindfulness for resilience could usefully be conducted across the sector.
- A further longitudinal study is needed to evaluate whether increased resilience is sustained, and to identify if the result of this study is replicated.
- Colleagues across the sector could usefully look to use existing mindfulness tools and techniques in order to support and enhance resilience within the student population.
- Linking with the 'Efficiency, Effectiveness and Value for Money' report developed from the sector review led by Professor Sir Ian Diamond, there are opportunities to establish efficiencies by working across higher education providers to deliver mindfulness for resilience courses, which would benefit the student population.