

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

Ideas in Academic Practice: Structures of Wellbeing in Learning and Teaching

Hello and welcome to Episode 19 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this intro. This is our fifth instalment of ideas and academic practice.

And we welcome back Dr. Paul Fleet, who is with Kate Aitchison, head of Student Health and Well-Being,

who have a very open and honest conversation about student health and student wellbeing issues.

Now, Kate and Paul, with others created something called the SACS Circle.

And in this episode, they talk about how that idea has expanded and developed and how communication and bringing people together is really important.

So let's pass over to Paul. Hello and welcome again to another podcast about ideas and academic practice.

My name's Paul and I'm of the chair of the Academic Practice Board and have been your host for a few of these podcasts.

Now, as academics, professional staff and students,

I'm sure we are acutely aware and encounter of health and well-being issues in the workplace on a daily basis and

in one institution it recorded a 265% increase in the interactions in one session.

And let's just be clear, that isn't an exceptional case.

Such numbers and such issues were recorded pre-pandemic and these concerns and issues have not gone away.

This affects everybody. It affects the colleagues and the students and those people that support and help colleagues and students.

So it's not something that's outside of learning and teaching in higher education.

It's a core part of this. Now, one need only consider suggestions from companies and organisations.

Until, for example, mind who are not only invested in this area,

but calling with significant research data to continually raise the profile of such

issues and move towards proactive and preventative measures across higher education.

Back when I was the deputy head of the School of Arts and Cultures, I wanted to do something productive for our school.

And to me, it was about communications and connections with academic units and the well-being service.

And I'm about to introduce you to Kate in a few moments. Kate and I hatched a plan that became affectionately known as the SACS Circles.

So put very quickly, I was the academic lead. Kate was the wellbeing professional Lead Erica

Savin was a member of the Technical Professional Services, and Nicky Gibson was a member of the Academic Professional Services and we formed a group.

And that group met regularly to discuss current future concerns,

form links across various parts of the university and ultimately provide ideas and preventative suggestions.

I mean, some of the things we did, we put in place desk calendars that gave pastoral guidance to staff and put in

place useful numbers so that during those potentially difficult interactions,

a structured and supported conversation could be had. We put in place specific staff training

that was based upon the discipline.

And it led to initiatives such as the Hatton Gallery art sessions and actually putting pianos across the campus for anybody just to sit down and play.

Now, since then, this project has grown and it's grown into other areas as well.

So, Kate, would you like to see a little bit more about who you are, what your involvement is, and then talk about how that projects developed?

Yeah, sure. Thanks, Paul. So I'm Kate Aitchison. I'm head of Student Health and Wellbeing.

So I look after a number of the wellbeing services, including welfare and counselling, disability support and the chaplaincy service.

So this you're absolutely right, Paul. This was about communication.

It was about bringing people together. And we really found the value in that in having that real link between wellbeing and the school

and bringing together that specialist knowledge both of general wellbeing themes and trends,

but also with the key knowledge about that particular school,

about the particular intricacies of different courses and themes that were coming

across via PEC forms and personal tutor appointments and everything like that.

So alongside some work that was going on about personal tutoring,

what has really grown from this now is student wellbeing advisers based within schools.

Now, what we did initially was a pilot at one of those, of course, was in SACS and another couple of schools.

And within HaSS. And that pilot has been absolutely brilliant.

So that pilot to expand a little bit about these school-based wellbeing advisers.

And they are part of central services, but they are physically based within particular schools.

And the idea is that we have these members of staff who are completely embedded both within the academic school but also within central services.

So they have absolutely phenomenal links with the centralised team with all of the different elements of student wellbeing.

But they've got that very specialist knowledge about particular courses.

They get to know the lecturers, they get to know the students. They are physically there in the schools and we've got them as first points of contact.

And so when when students aren't quite sure kind of what they need or who they need to speak to,

perhaps coming in to central services, coming into Kings Gate could be a bit intimidating.

And they've got that person to go to. And that is the same for tutors as well.

We've had really good feedback from school staff that if they come across,

the student who they're concerned about or a wellbeing issue is talked about as part of the personal teaching meeting,

they know that they can sometimes physically walk that student down the corridor and have them in front of someone that is well versed in wellbeing.

And, you know, the school based wellbeing advisers, they're not counsellors, they're not disability advisers.

They are first point of contact with those links so they can have that supportive conversation with a student that is well within their remit,

their training, their expertise. And if necessary, they can then really directly link them with the specialist part of the service.

And like I say, it's been hugely successful, that pilot,

so much so that we are now in the process of inducting another five soon to be six members of staff which are going to see students.

wellbeing advisers school based student wellbeing advisers across every faculty, not yet in every school.

That's why we do really like to go but branching out.

So we've now got these roles in every faculty across the university. I mean, that's quite incredible because it's not just a bridge.

It's a connecting element. And I think for me, what I found when we were working on this was it's back to that point.

I mean, a student can have a PEC, which we call a personal extenuating circumstances form.

It's the idea is mitigating against something that's happened to them in their well-being

that's preventing them from being able to engage with a course in a normal progression.

And that sometimes falls on a personal tutors head or an academic head or a module leader's head.

And many of us, if not the majority, we're not qualified to do this.

And quite frankly, we shouldn't really be dealing with this because we can open up a Pandora's box without even realising it.

Similarly, on the other side of the fence are the colleagues and wellbeing who can't possibly know every part of the program or degree regulation,

or when particularly chemical exam has to take place due to radioactive elements that might I don't know, I'm riffing.

So trying to do the music one which would also be logical about when a performance would be.

But there are those complexities. Yeah, of course. So. These people sit between Connect Cross, listening to the student, listening to their concerns.

That makes sense of their academic journey and help work within the central services.

So when you say that they're not counsellors and that they're not particular leads in a thing.

Is it the fact that they are actually able to join the dots, which is what we hope the circles do, is their strength?

And do you feel that this is a loaded question

because I have my opinion, do you feel it sort of removes some of the concern that the staff from colleagues and module leaders

pastoral tutors feel in engaging with the students who has often quite really difficult things to do.

Do you feel sort of supports them in a more connective way?

Absolutely. The the school based wellbeing advisers are in that position of having all the names and having the knowledge that is so, so specific.

And there's no one else that has that there. And that's the really vital piece.

That's the really vital piece of this. Is that is that being embedded both within the school and within the central services.

And that is unbelievably helpful to the student because they're speaking to someone that understands the course they're speaking about,

understands the cohort that,

you know, understands whether it's at a very small, very intense kind of group or whether they're part of a massive 500 person lecture.

And they're very, very different.

And that might you say it's it's a level of knowledge that the central staff can't hope to have for every single subject,

every single course across the university.

And these people do and they've they've got those links and the knowledge about the central services and about how to kind of manage

these difficult situations as difficult conversations that every academic and school based member of staff can hope to have.

You know, we've all got our different Specialisms. And that's as it should be.

They are they are so well based not only to make a difference to the students, but absolutely to the academics as well,

that hopefully that reassurance of having someone with these well-being links and here is is focussed on that.

wellbeing fit for the staff has made has made a really big difference.

So we're told so the feedback tells us that they can kind of just really join those dots.

I think that's right. I do. And I do think the right. And now let's deal with a really big and often thorny issue of.

I'm an academic. I go into my lecture theatre to deliver my disciplined.

Why should I be worried about wellbeing of the students? That's a really dark and oversimplified picture.

But why do you think that wellbeing is actually everyone's business and particularly why is it so important to bring it to the fore

be open and transparent and connective so that those complexities don't remain hidden?

And I know other loaded that question from my way of asking you, but I think it's something that some people might be thinking,

well, sure, if you're an academic, you do the academic things. And if you're a technician, you to the technician things.

Why is it important to connect those dots? I do you think wellbeing is everyone's issue

we're all human and we all have our own levels of wellbeing.

And, you know, we've we've all got our own mental health.

Whether that's good, that's bad, goes through different stages.

We will we will have that. We will know what it's like and we can see it in other people.

And actually, you know, we can be pretty good at recognising that in other people as well.

What sometimes we're not quite so good at is knowing what to do about it.

And that's you know, that's, again, where where these roles fit in, because actually.

Your academics, your technicians, your PS staff within the schools that, you know, that are there for hand in for PEC forms,

quite often they are the people that notice when there's a change in a student's wellbeing.

You know, we've got amazing specialists in our central service who, when they see a student,

are incredible at looking and assessing their levels of need, what's going on for them.

But we don't see those students everyday people out in the schools do.

And you know what

we would say if we ever do training, if we ever speak to people in schools, is we don't need everyone to be an expert in mental health.

We don't need people to be an expert in what signs and symptoms are aligned to which diagnoses we really, really don't.

And, you know, that's a level that is our expertise.

And it isn't we couldn't do your job

and do all the academic teaching and we don't need you to do all that.

What you guys are well-placed to notice and what school based are well-placed notice is change, change, change in someone.

You know, you might be looking at attendance, for example, and you might have somebody that

has 95% attendance all the time that suddenly drops to seventy five.

You might have somebody else saying is usually around 75% attendance, actually that's their normal.

It's not a worry for them at all. That's a no, that's their level of attendance.

That's what you're used to. It doesn't really change,

but you person that's usual 95% suddenly drops to 75% actually that's a change for them and that's potentially meaningful for them.

Something shifted. I understand.

So what you're saying is it's the norm for the student rather than an external norm of you must have 90% attendance.

There's a visa requirement that you're on line for this.

We're talking about it being specific and often program secretaries degree program directors.

They're the people who would naturally see those fluctuations in the person.

Yeah, absolutely. You might have someone there is usually really, really engaged in a seminar.

You know, really talkative. It's always done the reading.

And then you might see a shift in that and that starts to change.

That's a change for them. Now, they might at that stage, it's been a change for them.

They might still be contributing just as much as somebody else. But usually they've contributed and it's different for them.

So at Newcastle, we have pretty clear guidance what to do, how to contact the team.

And I'm sure many institutions are the same. So kind of what I want to do is talk about a run through because they want to keep listening

to this who are either early career or potentially later in the career or thinking,

actually, this is something I do want to know what to do and how far I should behave within this and what I should do.

So let's let's talk top level without being specific to our university.

But let's role play this out and let's let's see what happens. So I'm the lecturer and I've spotted that there's this student who attends everything.

Let's take your example. Is still attending everything but is now no longer really wanting to contribute to

the group is looking less than they did that their mannerisms or slightly more inward.

Is that enough for me to go up to that person and say, hey, how you doing?

I would say yes. So there are ways of having those sort of conversations.

There are some things you need to consider, OK? But there's nothing wrong with saying to someone, actually.

I've noticed this and this seems to be a bit of a change. Is everything all right?

Now, you need to think about doing that carefully and sensitively.

And so I wouldn't suggest that you just approach them within a lecture or something like that where you're us, you know,

essentially asking them to open up about something that's gonna be personal in front of a load of other people that wouldn't be appropriate.

You need some some privacy. Although I was making sure you're safe and people know what you're all.

You need to invite the students to do that.

And you need to be clear with them about. About the time that you've got about kind of confidentiality as well.

So what I'd always advise people to do is never to say what you tell me will be absolutely confidential.

It's not going to go anywhere else because you might need it to.

OK. If you know the changes that you've noticed in someone, do you mean something really serious?

Or they're really struggling? Let us just pick that up, because that is a superbly interesting point.

You do one of the students, that sort of sense that you aren't going to listen.

You aren't taking this seriously, but you don't invade on privacy. Yes, but your quite

right. There are situations where you probably feel you do have to report something.

And am writing this because it's where you have concern for themselves or others in a way that would be detrimental to life.

Yes, absolutely. It's not the kind of working definition of it. And is it all right to actually say to the student,

once you've got a safe space and they're happy to contribute to you and you see where the conversations going,

saying something like, OK, I'm going to take this really seriously I'm going to listen to everything you are saying

Please be aware because you may tell me something that might have a wider impact than just this conversation.

I might have to tell people in sort of either responsibility or authority,

because there's the sense that the student who wants to reach 18 is their one person.

They don't need to contact the parents. And that's it. That's so complicated. How did you move through that?

So the only people, you were going to tell someone that can help that student, that's always going to be your goal.

If you end up having to tell someone else, it's always going to be so they can get better support.

And that said, that's a key point to make to them.

And, you know, you're never going to be doing something just because you think someone else will find it really interesting.

And if you cannot be doing something to help them. And that's virtually all the time.

Will be something, but it will be a discussion you have with the student.

So you might say to the student, actually, I'm really concerned by what you told me.

You know, that that sounds really serious. What I think needs to happen is that we may need to get you some support for this.

That's a bit more specialist. So what I'm going to do is speak to my colleagues in wellbeing I'm going to ask them to reach out to you,

because I think it's really important that we get some support around to hear

and so your involving them in that you're telling them who you're going to.

Who are you going to tell you? Telling them why you going to tell them?

You know, students can sometimes think we're immediately going to pick up the phone to their parents behind their back.

Absolutely. Yes. That is incredibly, incredibly rare that we would ever do that.

We would only we would only break someone's confidentiality in and talk to someone without telling them.

If we thought that to tell them would be to increase their risk or the risk of somebody else's.

And that is very, very, very rare.

And why I would say to staff working in schools and that sort of thing, that never really has to be your decision that you can bring that to us.

Let us make those really tough calls because they are tough when it gets to that stage and that is what we're here for.

So realistically, most of the time, the only thing you are ever going to do if a student's opened up to you is to contact wellbeing.

Or to contact, kind of whatever the equivalent is

if you know this university. The exception to that is if there is an absolute imminent and immediate risk to that and to their life,

in which case you're probably going to call emergency services and then call us

and let us know what you've done and why and what the current situation is.

So, you know, if it needs to be an emergency response, then do that first and then loop us in.

Otherwise, it doesn't mean this is gonna be us. That makes sense talking about the human again, the human response, even though you're in the work environment.

Yes, absolutely. Is the assessment of what that means. Now let's deal with the other really tricky one.

Which is I mean, we start about the term mental health first, because mental health isn't negative.

No, absolutely not. Mental health is your mental health. It's a norm for you.

Like we have physical health, I think. Exactly. Exactly. So understanding that mental health and that boundary setting.

Now, let's talk about it from the difficulty of the person who notices the change in the student.

And what can quickly happen. And I know from experience this has happened.

The student identifies with that person and becomes a little too attached to tell them everything.

And then depending upon the colleague in question, they also similarly become attached or indeed find that uncomfortable of their reliance.

Now, you've talked to me for many years about boundaries, and I think I really love you to share those thoughts about how we do set a boundary in an

initial discussion or a later discussion with those people who are having those issues,

for colleagues support. So you just say a bit more about boundaries.

Yeah, sure. So kind of slightly mentioned this before about going to a space safe place.

So you've got kind of an appropriate location and time, that sort of thing.

And it's about being really clear with the student. OK.

So, you know, if you've if you've only got half an hour, tell them that and you know, if you can make that positive thing.

So I'm I'm going to set aside this time. We've got a full half an hour to kind of speak about what's going on for you and to see why you need to go next.

Always right from the beginning. Put in there that little caveat that already starts to suggest it's not going to be you all the time.

You're gonna be looking for where their support needs are going to be best met.

And again, don't promise them absolute confidentiality.

Because that then gets you into a bit of a tricky, tricky spot.

Be aware of your role. What's professional and what is within your remit that's really important that keeps you safe

and keeps the students safe and they hopefully stop some of that kind of overreliance.

So please try not to, don't give out mobile numbers or tell students to call you whenever day or night.

Although really well-meaning.

That can be really, really tricky. Surely transcends that boundary, that really moves across into something unhelpful.

I'm thinking of a case where a student would say, but I was calling you, I needed that support.

But it's two o'clock in the morning here and it's like you shouldn't be available to be called at that point.

Correct. So you set it up really clearly. And if someone's really distressed, I completely understand you.

You want to give them everything.

And and it might feel a bit mean to put those boundaries, but actually it's really helpful for someone to know where they stand.

And what you're doing is making sure that that the numbers that they've got

for outside of hours and the support they've got is what meets their needs.

And, you know, I'm sure we've got lots of academics, lots of professional services staff who actually might be qualified.

And, you know, my might do things like volunteer with Samaritans and things like that.

They've got all of those skills. And it's and they want to help and they want to use them.

We need to think about what your role here is.

You know, what do you set yourself up to this student and the rest of the students as your area expertise and what you do and sticking to that.

You know, we've got some great services in the university. We've got some great services in the community.

They are there for a reason to use them. So the boundary setting is really important.

But telling a student where they stand, listening to them and then helping them take that next step.

So saying I have heard you I've understood this does sound tough.

Let's look at where we can get you support. And that step, that signposting step again is helpful for you and your boundaries.

It is helpful for you as a member of staff being able to walk away and feel like you've done something helpful and that if you've done that,

that helps you be able to kind of draw a line and and not kind of get over

attached, over worried and overinvolved about that student because, you know, you've given them something helpful.

And that's one of the two things I remember we talked about, which was the stop and the sign post,

because I've experienced this, I'm sure many others have as well. The student, it just doesn't leave the office,

the student that stays there and goes round and round and round who because they've actually found someone who is prepared to listen.

Yeah, exactly. Got himself stuck into the loop. And, you know, it's it's not help seeking behaviour.

So it's all right

to say to a student, OK, so we've actually had those half an hour and I have to go on to another meeting to know.

What I've said to you, though, is you could go and talk to these people.

We could go talk to these people and you could go and have a meeting with those people.

And actually, I've got to leave the office now. So come on, let's walk out with me.

Those are tricks that you might just wish to go the toilet and come back.

You don't need to actually but it physically breaks that interaction.

Absolutely. So kind of summarising it. Reminding them that these next steps now do that before you hit the half an hour mark.

Know say, you know, I'm conscious. Thank you so much for sharing what you have with me.

You know, I really appreciate that. And we've had some very good conversations about where you can go.

I'm conscious that we're almost we're almost out of time. I said I wouldn't keep you for more than half an hour.

Again, just, you know, kind of try and turn it around. Yep. So, you know, these are things we.

This is your next step. You know, if you're gonna do that now because you know that that's out that way.

I'm walking that way as well. Let's let's see you out and then you can head over that and make that appointment.

You know, also, you have some private space to make that next phone call. And and we'll catch up later.

That makes sense. So we've talk about what we did as a connecting element between the schools and the units and your service.

Yeah. We've also talked about what you can do as an individual when you're talking as well.

Let's really zoom out. Let's talk about what's happening in the sector. Yes.

And help us move around. There are so many different organisations, as I said at the beginning,

about mind and others who are talking about how we need to be conscious of this support.

So an impossible task for you Kate a quick sketch of what's going on and how we can use those resources or even become involved to help support.

Yeah, sure. So I think probably the best thing to talk about is, is the number of years ago well a few years ago now.

There was a paper step change that got released and that has some really key recommendations for universities about how to support well-being,

mental health, but that broadly, really broadly well-being.

And what it took is something of the buzz word or buzz phrase that you'll hear about is a whole university approach to university.

So very much what we were thinking when when we set up the SACs circles this is

not just about what well-being services you offer to students in a university.

This is everyone's business. Absolutely everyone's business.

And we need that whole university approach,

not just about services to help when students have problems with their well-being or problems with their mental health.

But how we provide a positive environment for people's well-being.

You know, do we? I know plenty of bike racks to to kind of help help students think about exercise,

which is beneficial for your mental health and getting fresh air and access to open spaces.

Pianos on campus. You know that it hits a lot of the things that we thought about.

Back when we looked at the circles concept so very much looking at that whole university approach that that work's been great.

It's been taken very seriously across the section, including in this university.

And it's moved on a little bit. Now, it's been it's been kind of finessed in.

One of the key things that has come out of it is the student minds mental health charter, universities mental health charter that is is fairly new.

Right. And that is something that Newcastle as a university is looking at.

And they're going to go for it, as I see a number of universities around the country.

So really looking at what we do, how we can evidence what we do,

what are our areas that actually weren't already providing really good environments in different places for well-being.

And what are the areas actually we need a little bit of work on. And so that, I would say,

is really key to that kind of key documents and key movements in the sector towards that whole university approach to well-being and mental health

charter is going to be something that the universities can apply for. And so a real external validation, if you like,

of what universities do to support good levels of well-being amongst their students and staff communities.

And I think for me, that charter is not about actually getting the charter status or the mark or nice piece of paper.

It's actually about the process as much as 100 percent. And it's about collecting evidence you'll find.

And this is why we did the SACs circles as well,

because it stops individual brilliant initiatives happening in very small areas that aren't connected across here.

It helps sharing the good purpose and actually being responsible enough as a community.

And it's that phrase you said the whole university approach.

And we've got so much expertise at an institution like this.

You've got so many expertise. You know, I think the the piano's is perhaps a really nice example of this where, you know,

as a as a kind of wellbeing service, we've spoken to students about, you know, what what do they miss?

You know, what helps their mental health or their levels of well-being that they can't get at university?

And there are a number of things that came up and something that came up every time was was pianos, you know.

For a lot of students, this is your well-placed to know music and playing a musical instruments is is a key positive of self-care.

And what people do to wind down, to have moments of mindfulness and that sort of thing.

Now. They can't bring their piano up to university

You know, that's not easy to fit them in your park view bedroom.

It's not. Unless actually you're studying music

that the opportunity to play a piano.

Once you get to university isn't there, you know, unless you happen to have enough money left from your student loans to go and get lessons also.

It just wasn't very accessible to our students. Now we knew that.

We've been hearing that for a number of years.

But actually it wasn't until we kind of got together and we bought that from our well-being stand.

And you as a department that was around music was like, well, actually, we're doing this the way of doing this.

We've got access potentially to pianos. Let's get it sorted.

And, you know once we got together.

In fact, it was actually very easy to do.

And yet has been some of the things that I've been asked for and had known about for years that we just haven't got together about.

And they were just so many examples of that. Those pianos are not the best pianos in the world, not concert standards.

But that's not what somebody want.

They want a set of keys to express themselves or being a moment of mindfulness or actually performed to friends.

So we just took five pianos that were the gift to us so that we retired out to department.

We approached lots of different schools. And when you go to space that you'd like a piano.

Yeah. And within a couple of weeks, it was incredible how well they were being used.

Yeah, it really was. And we're getting them tuned this week because they're ready to come back into action, which is wonderful.

Kate, I think we've covered quite a few things there.

What I want to say is that if anybody's listening to this and is really interested in those structures, the circles, the connections that we've got,

we'll put a link in the description to the podcast about who you can get in touch with so please do check the text at the start of this podcast.

And we're more than happy to share any of that information. When we presented it, the smarten conference.

Yeah, a little while ago about this idea. And it's reached a wider audience, but it's something we like to do as podcasts.

Right to the end is give a sort of gingerbread trial.

Where could somebody go and get something to read further? So you tell me yours.

What? What are you going to advocate for? People looking at what's what's a good thing for them to chase?

So I really think the stepchange document that came out and that mental health charter work is is they are the key documents.

Okay. Really to to look at to give you a flavour of where the sector is heading,

what the sector thinks is important and what us as a university is taking on board.

And there's an awful lot of work going into this at the moment. And it'll be great to keep you updated about how we're getting on.

That makes sense and mine comes from Universities UK 2018.

And it's a document called Minding Our Future, Starting a conversation about the support of student mental health.

We're going to give you the links to again on the podcast at the beginning. But I think you're right.

Some of these documents that don't sit within university but are from outside and supporting the colleagues at university,

are the key areas that can help us move and stay connected.

Kate, thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you very much, Paul.

Thank you very much, Kate.

That was a great conversation about a very important subject and topic that affects a lot of our students and all of our staff here as well.

We hope that you've enjoyed this episode and you've got a lot out of it.

Please feel free to visit our show notes, where the all the links that Paul and Kate spoke about will be sitting.

And remember to like subscribe and tell your friends to download his podcast as well.

Thank you very much.

And we'll also see you in two weeks time.