Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Roundtable Summary: Developing a Student Commitment for Compassionate Communications and Processes

---

Chair: Edward Peck, HE Student Support Champion

Date/time: 3 October 2023, 12:00-14:00

Agenda:

Agenda item	Topic	Lead
1	Welcome and introduction	Edward Peck
2	Case study: Plymouth Marjon University	Katy Willis, PVC Student Success
3	Case study: Oxford Brookes Students' Union	Rebecca Turnton, Head of Communications and Engagement
4	Reflection on case studies: how far towards what we want to achieve do these initiatives take us?	All
5	Broader discussion	All
6	Summary and close	Edward Peck

Welcome and introduction

- Edward Peck began the session by outlining the work of the Taskforce and the motivations behind convening a roundtable to discuss different approaches to embedding compassion into higher education communications and processes.

Case Study: Plymouth Marjon University

- Katy Willis gave an overview of the approach at Plymouth Marjon, highlighting the importance of trust and student-centred communications, and their positive impact on student experience outcome measures, belonging and satisfaction.
- A model for compassionate communications was presented, which included:
  - Defining an ideal vision of how an institution wishes to interact and communicate with students;
  - Embedding opportunities for students and staff to provide challenge;
  - Considering what you want your audience to know, feel and do, including how and when to initiate communications; and
  - Honing your language and consider its tone, clarity, and personality.

Case Study: Oxford Brookes Students' Union

- Rebecca Turnton outlined the experience of a Students' Union in supporting students who have received university communications, often relating to academic or disciplinary processes. These key reflections included:
    - Communications feel too impersonable and lack compassion and sensitivity.
    - There is an overreliance on emails which students may find overwhelming.
    - Communications lack clarity as they are often written in legalese.
    - Communications do not encourage student autonomy.
    - Colleagues are not always available to provide support following a communication.

Reflections on Case Studies and Discussion

- Attendees discussed the appropriate medium of communications. It was noted that some students prefer face to face communications as they are seen as more accessible, particularly when delivered by key academic colleagues. Other suggestions included presenting complex university processes in diagram or infographic form to support students' understanding.
- The idea of a compassionate campus was raised, which would extend further than communications and processes to include all aspects of a university's operations and interactions with students (e.g. examination timetabling).
- Attendees raised the importance of ensuring communications are clear as to not create uncertainty in students which may further cause mental distress.
- The experience of those HEPs which have begun reviewing policies and communications suggests it is important to adopt a systematic approach, which might include starting with those communications which are most likely to cause distress, or building this work into the standard review process for policies.
- The need for HEPs to have good information and insight about a student to personalise communications was noted. One suggestion included having an effective CRM system which aligned data, analytics, and information about a student to support this.
- HEPs should take students in good faith and consider their individual circumstances when considering a process or policy (for example, mitigating circumstances or academic appeals). Rigid policies, or asking students to present too much evidence too often, may result in further distress or barriers to engagement.
- It was suggested that HEPs could supplement their colleague-facing policies with student-friendly guides in order to support understanding and clarity. This may be particularly helpful where it concerns complex policies that have specific and potentially punitive outcomes.
- The topic of personal tutors was raised by a number of attendees. Tutors are often required to provide pastoral support to students and more guidance could

be provided to support them to deliver communications more compassionately and sensitively.

- It was noted that too much compassion and permissiveness might prevent a HEP from setting clear boundaries with students. Attendees agreed that HEPs should remove harmful language and embed compassion into their communications, but they should also be able to retain authority with students and ensure expectations and consequences are set out clearly.

Summary and Close

- Edward Peck closed the discussion by outlining the need to find balance between compassion, kindness, authority, and clarity, and how this might be framed in the wider context of a compassionate campus.
- Attendees were encouraged to share any suggestions or examples with the HE Student Support Champion team, so that they can inform ongoing discussions in the HE Mental Health Taskforce.