Session 1: How can our institutions support staff wellbeing?

1.1 Building a supportive Institution - a systems-psychodynamic approach to supporting the psychological wellbeing of staff and students in higher education
Charlotte Williams, Tavistock Consulting

Whilst individual levels of resilience amongst staff and students play a part in their ability to manage the demands of university life, such an approach absolves organisations of responsibility for how it might impact upon the psychological wellbeing of its people. The Tavistock model for staff wellbeing upholds that both the nature of the task, the context within which with the institution finds itself, leadership, culture and the structures of the organisation impact upon the wellbeing of its people. It acknowledges that people in organisations are different, and have varying levels of psychological resilience. It recognises that the organisation plays a key role in the psychological wellbeing of staff and proposes a framework to consider how to create and maintain a ‘supportive organisation’ within which people with different levels of resilience can not only survive but thrive. The model proposes five main pillars that impact upon the wellbeing of an organisation’s members. Each of these pillars is interconnected and exist under the influence of the current economic, social and political climate. If all pillars are regularly engaged with, organisations can find ways of providing an environment within which staff and students can thrive and contribute to achieving the organisational aims.

1.2 A connected approach to supporting colleagues at University College Cork
Dr Anne Gannon, University College Cork

In University College Cork, we have adopted a whole university connected approach to supporting colleagues during the challenging months created by Covid19. This case study will demonstrate the diverse and broad range of initiatives and supports enabled across the university during this time. Anne as UCC Staff Wellbeing and Development Manager in UCC will present details of the programmes, networks, and supports created which have been put in place to support and develop colleagues. She will describe the initiatives and outcomes arising from the work of the University Management Team to support staff working online. She will also outline engagement mechanisms that have been developed which recognise the work of UCC colleagues and which highlight self-care and wellbeing across the staff community.

1.3 Measuring Portsmouth University staff wellbeing within a framework for evaluation and support
Dr Denise Meyer, Melita Sidiropoulou, Daphne Kaklamanou, Zarah Vernham and Laura Hyman, University of Portsmouth

In our presentation we will discuss the University of Portsmouth’s multi-faceted and mixed-methods project, ‘Measuring student and staff wellbeing: establishing a robust framework for evaluating the impact of innovative interventions to improve staff and student wellbeing, resilience and inclusion.’ We will focus on UoP staff participation in the project, how staff have been coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the aforementioned project has helped them (e.g., with the immediate personalised feedback about their answers to the standardised measures in the survey, and other ways). By measuring wellbeing and
resilience in the current difficult times, we hoped to learn more about the factors affecting staff (and student) wellbeing and resilience, and to explore the most effective ways to measure the aforementioned factors. Among other mixed methods used in the collection of data, there was one survey for staff during/after the first UK lockdown, with 626 responses from UoP staff. The project approach was informed by the innovative Wellbeing for Learning & Teaching model, a conceptual framework emphasising an educational, as opposed to medicalised or deficit-focused, approach to the issue of mental health. Only early findings will be explored, as the last survey has only just ended in December, 2020.

Session 2: Community and connection: how can we work together, and why?

2.1 Developing Teams as a Secure Base
Dr Laura Biggart, University of East Anglia

Secure Base is a term from Attachment Theory (Psychology) usually used in relation to child development (Bowlby, 1969). In our work on emotional resilience at work, we have found Secure Base dimensions of: Availability, Sensitivity, Acceptance, Co-operation and Belonging to be relevant to sustaining well-being at work. This presentation will outline the Team as Secure Base model and the research from which it was developed (Biggart et al 2017; Cook et al 2020). We will outline a training programme that we have developed and invite discussion as to whether this model could be helpful in HE and how this model could be implemented.

2.2 (Re)Connecting the disconnection: A case study of how Communities of Practice (CoPs) supports teaching practices
Sam Willis, Curtin University, Louise Reynolds and Kylie Gumbleton, Charles Sturt University

This case study describes the development of a teaching and learning Community of Practice (CoP) ‘from the ground up’ at a regional Australian university. CoPs are common in the higher education setting and have been around for some time (Star et al 2013).

They are acknowledged for their ability to cross interdisciplinary boundaries, bring people together to learn from one another through a process of deep reflection (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and act as a process allowing more junior members (known in the literature as newcomers) to observe and imitate more experienced staff members (known as old-timers). Using an action research approach (Lewin, 1941), case study reflections written by three (3) academics who convened a teaching and learning CoP. Members of the CoP were drawn from a variety of disciplines at the various regional campus. Meetings were held virtually (using Zoom) before, during and after the COVID19 enforced restrictions.

This case study describes how using the CoP as a methodology to ‘(re)connect the disconnection’, most significantly due to the impact of COVID19. Having already established the CoP prior to the restrictions, it was evident that the CoP facilitated and enabled members to share their concerns, challenges and successes.

2.3 Sticky objects and HE teacher well-being: views on the positive from the UK and Saudi Arabia university contexts
Dr Sian Etherington and Dr Judith Hanks, University of Salford

Teaching in Higher Education is an emotional business. Pressures and strains around
teaching are a well-recognised source of distress for many in the HE sector.

In contrast, positive emotions and experiences within HE teaching contexts are less frequently discussed or considered. This paper presents findings from British Council sponsored research capturing university teachers’ positive emotions within their daily lived experiences. Lecturers in the UK and Saudi Arabia were asked to record positive emotional ‘sticky objects’ (Ahmed 2004) (those objects that attract and retain emotional resonances) throughout sustained periods of teaching. The findings inform a deeper understanding of the elements of university contexts which help to sustain and protect teacher wellbeing. Implications for practice suggest ways in which teachers, institutions, and teacher development programmes can work for a more positive teacher experience and enhanced quality of life.

2.4 Living the value of care in a socially distanced learning community
Dr Julie Pearson and Jennifer Murray, St Mary’s University

This presentation reflects on the values-based practice which informed module design and delivery of two Primary PGCE Masters modules during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides an overview of the approaches undertaken to connect trainee teachers and lecturers as members of a socially distanced learning community. It examines the importance of co-creating safe, meaningful and dialogic learning spaces in which all participants and their contributions are valued. The presentation will highlight the steps taken to ensure that lectures were live, interactive, provided opportunities for dialogue and modelled a core value of care. It will share reflections on the impact of this new way of learning, highlighting further possibilities to reconnect and strengthen the innate act of ‘caring with’ those we work and learn alongside.

Session 3: What develops individual wellbeing?

3.1 Creating time and space for new academics by embedding coaching skills in their accreditation programme
Sarah Wolfenden, Brunel University London

It is common practice for new academic staff to be required to achieve Advance HE accreditation. This is achieved through a variety of programme and pathway routes depending on their experience. Due to excessive workloads, stress, and now a pandemic, it can be seen by some as a hurdle, a tick-box exercise, and possibly not relevant - especially for those who wish to focus on research.

Building on the 2020 Advance HE conference where I introduced the prospect of utilising coaching skills to benefit both our students’ and our staff wellbeing, I am going to focus specifically on new academic staff. I will discuss my endeavours to embed coaching skills such as goal setting, reflective writing, active listening, summarising, as well as a range of tools and techniques.

Direct coaching, coaching skills and the creation of a coaching culture have been used to great effect in both corporate and secondary education sectors, as evidenced by the ILM Report and the work completed by Leeds Institute on Coaching and Mentoring. I am a primary school governor where I see it begin to be embedded. I will argue that it would be a shame for the Higher Education sector to not be a part of this movement to making education human-centred.

3.2 Supporting research students during COVID-19: Sharing good practice from Essex
Anne Kavanagh, Katrine Sundsbo, Hannah Pyman and Dr Samer Gharib, University of
Essex

The impact of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being in UKHE may not be disputed (Burns et al., 2020; Armour et al., 2020). However, the psychological impact of the pandemic on research students is yet to be fully scrutinised. Yet pre-pandemic data on research students already suggests high levels of anxiety (AdvanceHE, 2019).

It has been a strategic objective to improve research students’ well-being and mental health at Essex especially as so many research students also work as staff. In 2020, two collaborative activities between the Library Services and Organisational Development were implemented to move our support online and increase scaffolding on social contact to reduce loneliness and maintain academic progress.

‘Time to Write’, a virtual writing retreat, was designed in response to lockdown and possible isolation. It gives students time structure, accountability, and writing tips, but most of all provides a supportive atmosphere that allows positive relationships between attendees to flourish. Students commented, “it… felt like a big family”, and “this course has been a real life-line for me”.

Coaching opportunities have also been developed: general coaching providing confidential space to reflect and develop understanding of research students’ needs; pre- and post-viva coaching addressing action plans and the psychological impact of Vivas; and group coaching for early career academics.

3.3 Examples of high impact individual wellbeing skills: e.g. time and stress management; emotional resilience
Dr Abeer Hassan and Dr Dalia Allazzeh, University of the West of Scotland

While teaching is a difficult, complex profession, COVID-19 has pushed academic staff to face huge responsibilities in addition to teaching roles. This includes caring, kindness, and emotionality that are necessary parts of teachers’ work.

In this case study, we illustrate how academic staff tendencies to care have not changed during the sharp transition to online teaching. The authors felt that their professional and academic identities are shaped by how well they see themselves caring for their students.

We illustrate in our case study how we started to plan early in the summer of 2020 by designing a survey. Based on students’ opinions, we designed our teaching material, methods, etc. based on “You said-We did”.

This includes using a mix of synchronous & asynchronous modes of teaching and providing support classes to handle any queries. We also used different activity tools such as Padlets, Kahoot, Mentimeter, etc to engage them in class. In addition, we created Polls each week to provide immediate feedback. Later on during the term, we felt students are so down and we used some of the teaching time to use some activities to ask them how they feel and pushing them to focus on the positive side of this pandemic to keep them going and provide them with positive quotes from the internet to make them feel ok.

In summary, we want to showcase how some academic staff caring for and about students. This includes responding to all sorts of academic, physical, and emotional needs during the pandemic.

(1) Hassan, A. Alazzeh, D. Leung, D., Sidhva, D. and Obasi C. (2020). Investigating students’ support for learning experience during COVID-19 & the way forward“. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/abeer-hassan-23b7ab26_uws-students-voice-on-online-
Session 4: What is effective leadership for staff wellbeing?

4.1 Recognising whole units in succession
Samatha Ross, University of St Andrews

Succession transitions can be turbulent, creating uncertainty and negatively impacting wellbeing for predecessors, remaining staff, and successors. Knowledge which would support successors in a positive transition is often found among remaining staff and goes beyond café recommendations. Many suggest that the social construction of leadership interacts with succession, such that experiences with a predecessor and early interactions with a successor influence the transition. Moreover, the literature on professional service staff suggests they have immense dedication to, and knowledge of, their respective units and institutions. Therefore, is it time that scholars and HE professionals work together to co-create a more harmonious succession experience for all? Drawing from followership theory and the literature on leadership succession, this presentation focuses on the recognition and inclusion of professional service staff in Head of Unit/Director change. This presentation evidences the benefit of and practical solutions for whole unit inclusion prior to and during such transitions. This shifts away from the paucity of research into professional service units in HE, more generally and specific to succession; and the use of followership theory to inform this presentation also improves upon previously leader-centric discourses.

4.2 Compassionate HE management in a time of Covid
Andrea Cameron, Abertay University

The quick move online in March 2020 presented challenges to all UK HE institutions in terms of managing both staff and students. Staff were navigating new ways of working while remote from their usual departmental support systems and were juggling changes to family life while also managing a raft of student enquiries.

Collegiality and looking out for each other, were very much to the fore and this enabled many to navigate the end of the 2019-20 academic year. However, the sustained nature of public health restrictions has meant staff having to rapidly become digitally competent, while still dealing with disruptions to family life as well as concerns arising from the non-discriminatory nature of Coronavirus.

University managers are nervous about aspects of student recruitment/retention/experience but need to balance interventions to manage these with staff welfare. Fatigue is being voiced by the HE workforce and it’s imperative that managers are sensitive to the impact of their decisions and are attuned to the toll that prescribed practices may have on staff. Compassion and listening are key to good leadership at this time alongside effective alert and escalation systems to respond to wellbeing concerns. The presentation will reflect on the emergent learning for managers.

4.3 Reflections of a Wellbeing Champion
Dr Meryl Dickinson, Brunel University London

My experience as Wellbeing Champion started when I returned to work from my maternity leave in January 2020 and I was approached by several colleagues as a Mental Health First Aider. When I raised some of these issues with my Head of School, he was incredibly supportive of having someone vocal within the Department to respond to Wellbeing concerns. He financed my attendance at an Embedding Mental Health Best Practice Conference and agreed for me to conduct a Departmental Survey to gauge how the overall wellbeing of the Department was, and what staff might find useful. What was evident from
this survey’s results was that staff often felt stressed when thinking about work and were unable to switch off, but at the same time they felt the atmosphere was friendly and there was a genuine appreciation for the people they work with. Then, the pandemic hit, the stress and the ability to switch off worsened, while the ability to engage with the positive environment became less. My reflection will discuss these insights and how my position as NSS and Student Experience Coordinator has allowed a unique perspective into how vital the balance between the student experience and staff wellbeing is.