

**‘Bounce Back’: increasing access
for international students to student
wellbeing services
University of Sunderland**



'Bounce Back': increasing access for international students to student wellbeing services

The University of Sunderland

Summary of the project

The Student Wellbeing Service ran a series of workshops designed to support international students with their transition into university life and culture in the UK, with a particular emphasis on mental health and looking after personal wellbeing.

12 students attended the workshops and the evaluations showed an increase in wellbeing and in help-seeking behaviour, as measured by the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS).

We also designed a leaflet to be issued to international students about managing wellbeing. This was published in the top two languages of international students at the University.

A section of the wellbeing service website was created dedicated to international students' wellbeing.

Background information

The University of Sunderland has over 2,500 full-time international students (25.5% of all full-time students). However, our monitoring figure identified that engagement in Student Wellbeing Services did not reflect this figure with approximately only 9% of all referrals received coming from international students (2015-16).

International students who did engage with the Student Wellbeing Service reported a lack of awareness of our

"Mental Health is defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."

World Health Organisation

presence on campus and an initial reluctance to engage due to pre-conceptions of the service as well as not considering themselves to have emotional or mental health difficulties. For example, a number of international students have cited cultural differences in perspectives of mental health, creating barriers to engagement and support. These findings are supported by the current body of research exploring international students' engagement in services (Bentley, Virgo and Hastings, 2016).

Aims

- **Targeted promotion of wellbeing:** helping international students recognise what wellbeing is and the factors that might affect wellbeing
- **Self-management skills:** supporting international students to develop a unique set of skills to increase personal resilience and confidence in managing their own wellbeing
- **Increasing social networks:** the opportunity for contact with other

Advertising of the workshop via poster. Issued in leaflet format and displayed on LCD screens around campus. This was emailed to all new international students.

international students, increasing social support and shared understanding

- Increasing referral to student wellbeing: raising awareness of support avenues in the University and encouraging help seeking behaviour when required

Establishing the project

Working with a member of staff from the International Office we looked at an engagement strategy to encourage international students to access Student Wellbeing.



Three workshops were designed. The content was largely activity-based and included discussion and information on topics such as culture shock, homesickness, basic stress and anxiety awareness, how to seek support, building resilience, and a session on mindfulness.

The sessions were informal and included refreshments.

See the links at the end of this report and download presentations from the UKCISA website.

Step 1

We identified key members of staff to be involved in the project. An International Students' Officer supported the project which was led by a mental health adviser in Student Wellbeing.

Step 2

We planned and designed the workshops and advertised across the University. Posters were distributed to student accommodation and targeted emails were sent to all recently-arrived international students. Leaflets were issued at the international student welcome event to over 240 students.

Step 3

Three workshops were delivered including a mindfulness session with the University chaplain. Evaluation and feedback was collated and used to inform the next series of workshops.

Step 4

The Student Wellbeing website was developed specifically targeting international students, raising awareness of struggles or difficulties that they may face as international students. (See Useful Links at the end of this report for a link to the website).

A leaflet was designed which included information on managing homesickness, seeking support and ways to ensure wellbeing. This was also posted on the Student Wellbeing website and was cascaded to academic staff with high numbers of international students in their cohort.

A flyer with 'welcome' in different languages was placed across the university in food areas, study areas, accommodation, etc. to catch the eye of international students and direct them to our services.

The Student Wellbeing website was mirrored on the main international students' pages of the University of Sunderland website.

Timescales

The workshops ran between November to December 2016. The leaflets and Student Wellbeing website were completed in May 2017.

Project evaluation

Challenges

1. The project was primarily the responsibility of a single member of staff with support from others. It was challenging to consistently fit the work in around the demands of staff roles.
2. The University of Sunderland underwent a significant restructure: departments were changed leading to difficulties in advertising and continuity of support. We advertised for a second set of workshops to take place after Christmas, when uptake was very low and we did not have the resources to investigate why. A likely explanation for the poor response may have been the impact of the restructure.
3. Delay in getting the leaflet designed and marketed, due to marketing commitments to other projects. We chose to design the leaflet after we had completed the workshops so we could create content based on themes or issues presented by students during the workshop. This meant it was behind in the queue for jobs with our marketing team which has a long lead-in time for publishing as it is a very small team.

Sustainability of the project

The Student Wellbeing website and leaflet are designed for a long shelf life. A smaller leaflet was sent to every new international student arriving and other leaflets produced for the international office to distribute directing students to the website. This series of leaflets is planned to continue for the foreseeable future.

Further dates have been agreed to continue to roll out the workshops with a new member of staff (who was

previously an international student) from Student Wellbeing to continue to support the programme.

The Sports Development team have agreed to support a fourth session. Sports Development are employed by the university to focus on engaging students in exercise and sport. They have a broader remit than staff based at the gym and offered to do a session which would engage the students and hopefully encourage longer-term activity. One suggestion was to host an introduction to cricket or volleyball as these tend to be more popular among international students.

Impact

Questionnaires were completed pre- and post-workshops. These showed an increase in personal wellbeing (measured using the WEMBS) and a slight positive shift in attitudes to help-seeking behaviour.

This shows the benefits of targeted engagement. Further research could look at retention rates to ascertain how many international students leave for wellbeing-related issues and investigate whether early intervention and targeted support could make a difference.

All of respondents reported finding the workshops helpful and said they would recommend the course to a friend.

In response to the question 'Can you tell us one thing you will do differently as a result of this workshop?', students commented:

'I will try to stop procrastinating and worrying about failing'

'Helped me manage my life better'

'I learnt new ways of coping with stress'

Two of the students who participated in the workshops went on to self-refer to student wellbeing. Some of our

current students accessing wellbeing came along to some of the workshops. Students were invited back to attend a further workshop run by the Students' Union entitled 'Look after your mate,' which encouraged students to look out for others who may develop or have mental health difficulties.

Access for international students in wellbeing increased to 18.1% (2016-17).

Recommendations for other UK institutions

1. Engage students as soon as they arrive in the UK. This can be done through the International Office, social media, emails and students' union groups.
2. Keep the focus in workshops on activities that allow students to talk to one another.
3. Adding refreshments helped to settle anxieties, provide a distraction and a common conversation point.
4. Check timings for internal marketing deadlines to avoid delays – or consider outsourcing.
5. Draw on resources in your institution. For example, mindfulness workshops with the chaplain in workshop 3 was rated highly.
6. Target the promotion and awareness-raising to this specific student cohort. It is important to focus on international students to consider what would work best, (for example we produced the leaflet with other languages). Another option is to work with students' union groups such as the Malaysian society or the Chinese society to target students. This is more effective than producing or using generic promotional materials.

Useful links

Wellbeing Service website

<http://sls.sunderland.ac.uk/wellbeing-international>

Presentations

Week 1:

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ZKnLIEY1WgYKPIf7vFM58qxRQ4p46itDOGWU9Y1SVyl/edit?usp=sharing>

Week 2:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1VK8TikhTyHjB65DgJ58bMIAWclvqd70yXu5ZLMv-_ro/edit?usp=sharing

Week 3:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Mhh8UjRp8m_TUUF9qf9CTQAR8AZKsLygl0lv-y4itg/edit?usp=sharing

References

Bentley, A., Virgo, M., and Hastings, D., 2016. Reaching out to enhance the wellbeing of International students. Are you University counselling and wellbeing services accessible and inclusive? *Research into the international student experience in the UK 2015-16*. London: UKCISA. Available at https://institutions.ukcisa.org.uk/file_download.aspx?id=18311.

Further information

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