

Education for mental health case study

Skills and Support for your English Degree/English Language and Literature

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Context

Dr Sarah Lewis and Dr Josh Davies were Head of First Year and Head of Second Year respectively in the English department from 2015-2018. In 2015, Sarah and Josh developed the 'Skills and Support for your English Degree' (SSED) programme comprising of department-led sessions orientated around skills development and support for English students.

The SSED programme was developed in 2015 with the following objectives:

- 1 To support student wellbeing. The key challenge for the newly created Head of Years in the English department in 2015 was how to support the mental wellbeing of their students. The rising problem of increasing poor mental health in university students hit the media around this time. This caused anxiety amongst staff and students, and the English department wanted to offer both more support. This was combined with an increasing number of mitigating circumstances applications being submitted. There was a general sense that students often felt stressed and anxious. Therefore, the SSED programme provided a framework of support to improve wellbeing and with the aim of talking about mental health issues and hopefully supporting students in a way which prevented them getting to crisis point.
- 2 To increase a sense of community. The English department is a large department in the centre of London and, as such, they face specific challenges in terms of making their students feel part of and supported by a community. This was reflected in National Student Survey (NSS) feedback from 2013-15, which indicated English students at Kings College London felt isolated and didn't feel connected to other students and staff outside of lectures. The SSED programme provided an opportunity to build in more contact time with staff in the department beyond the eight-hour timetabled teaching schedule and provided a framework through which students could build networks and communities with each other across the department, particularly by funding events led by student groups (the Student Reps, The English Lit Soc, International Students etc).
- 3 To develop academic skills. There was lack of time in timetabled lectures and seminars to develop generic academic skills. The SSED programme provided an opportunity to improve study skills outside of modules eg on writing an essay, revision strategies, how to deal with feedback etc.
- 4 To prevent reliance of university-wide support services. The English department largely expanded between 2010 and 2015. There was a huge network of student support within the college but often students and personal tutors did not know how to access that support or make the most of it. Often centralized support services felt a bit generic for the students and they don't always provide the support English students necessarily need. Therefore, SSED aimed to bring some of that centralized support into the English department and make it feel targeted towards English students. The idea was to invite colleagues from these external services eg support services, careers, King's Wellbeing, the Counselling Service etc, into the department and for them to tailor their sessions to the English cohort by working with English Department staff. The aim was to try and help students avoid getting to a crisis point.

Pedagogic approaches to promote student wellbeing

- + **Implicit wellbeing content.** Wellbeing support from the SSED programme was wrapped around supporting generic academic skills because the English department found initially students were more likely to come to something if it was built into a workshop that felt more tangible in terms of what it was addressing. Most of the SSED events combine an element of academic skill with wellbeing. For example, an Essay Writing workshop might also tackle deadline stress/anxiety etc.

“Students anxieties are so wound up in the skills and what they are supposed to be doing as students, that there isn’t a separation there. I think it’s genius to frame it in that way.”

Lawrence Warner, senior tutor and SSED lead 2020/21

- + **Complementing personal tutoring.** The SSED programme complements personal tutoring roles, allowing a departmental approach to supporting wellbeing:

“The SSED takes pressure off the personal tutor role that previously was the ‘go to’ person for student mental health issues. This is good for faculty wellbeing too. We feel much more connected to students as they do to us. I don’t think that should be downplayed.”

Lawrence Warner, senior tutor and SSED lead 2020-21

- + **Tailoring for English studies students.** The SSED programme has ‘English degree’ in its title to emphasise this. Each year group has sessions that are really bespoke for their experience with scheduled sessions that coincide with different points in their semester. For example, a session on ‘making the most out of feedback’ at the point when students received their first piece of feedback. Assessment is described by English students as the most stress-inducing component of their course; therefore, feedback is intended to mitigate this.
- + **Drawing on expertise of relevant services.** For example, King’s Wellbeing helped co-create and deliver a session on giving feedback, and how wellbeing is impacted by that.

“Students got a lot from that [feedback] session because I wasn’t trying to do it alone! I don’t know everything so it’s important to draw on others’ expertise to help the students.”

Sarah Lewis, co-creator of SSED

- + **Non-traditional teaching.** The SSED sessions are less about teaching in a traditional sense, they are a space for students to ask questions, air their thoughts and concerns and a space for students to connect with one another. This intends to have a positive impact on wellbeing by lessening isolation, that can be common for students studying in central London.

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Key module information

Typical intake	220 students
Format	One-hour sessions
Level of study	Undergraduate all years
Status	Optional
Credited	No
Assessment	No
Assessment feedback	N/A
Location	Online
Teaching staff	Lecturer
Duration/ frequency	Weekly for semester A and B

Example schedule of events 2020-21

Session no.	First year sessions	Second year sessions	Third year sessions
1	Starting University: Any Questions	Transitioning to Second Year	Transitioning to Third Year
2	Listening and talking: lecture and seminar skills		
3	Being a Student Rep / Being a Digital Rep		
4	Making the Most of Online Learning		
5	Essay writing	The essay: criticality and originality	The next level: from second to third year essays
6	Marking your work: Assessment and Feedback		Hacking the third year
7	Revision Workshop		MA application session
8	Using Secondary Sources		
9	Writing Workshop: Making an Argument in your essays / Ditching the Filler		
10			Dissertation conference
11	All year session decided by students		
12	Module Mixer		
13	Choosing Your Modules	Should I do a dissertation?	

Development of events

- + Timetabled events. In the first year of SSED, events were not timetabled, and sessions were run ad hoc depending on availability of facilitators and student need. However, SSED leads learnt that having a regular weekly slot that shows in timetable, increased attendance.
- + Structure versus flexibility. It was important to have structure to the SSED programme, however, having certain gaps in the programme allowed for flexibility, and those unplanned sessions could be guided by students and their needs at the time. For example, last year (2020), there was a request for 'how to research on contemporary literature'. This session was put together quickly and was very well received.

"Having gaps in the schedule is a good way to check in with students. When there's a gap between sessions e.g. reading week, this is an opportunity to do more informal things in that slot. That contact time is really important thing for students."

Carl Kears, head of first year students and SSED lead 2021-22

- + Student- facilitated sessions. Students from the second and third years were often present in sessions for first year students so they could share their insights and tips. This was key in empowering students to create their own sense of community, and the department did this by funding and supporting events students wanted to run.

"I tell students to worry less all the time but coming from a third-year student is much more effective."

Carl Kears, head of 1st year students and SSED lead 2021-22

- + Support from virtual learning environment. Initially the SSED programme did not have an associated virtual learning page. However, once this was developed, it made SSED feel more like a module that students needed to engage with and a resource they could go to see slides, access recorded content, to find out about reps and societies ie a 'community hub' for students.

Challenges

- + Students receive a lot of misinformation from other students. For example, each year group has a WhatsApp group, that can be a source of confusion and anxiety. The SSED programme provides a space to address any concerns and direct students to correct information and resources.
- + Online learning. Whilst SSED has not always run online, there were some specific challenges when sessions were transferred online, though this was not necessarily specific to the SSED programme itself. For example, the chat function on Microsoft Teams can be abused if not monitored efficiently. However, it can support students to engage in a way they feel comfortable.

“Students made a lot of use of the chat function, it’s a mixed blessing from a wellbeing point of view. I think the chat has allowed students who might not be confident in a lecture hall to raise their hands, to participate and to contribute.”

Hannah Crawforth, online teaching lead, and session facilitator for SSED

- + Attendance. Attendance can often decline over the semester, as it is an optional module and students get busy with assessments. The key to improving attendance is advertising through effective channels, and putting on sessions that match students’ needs at specific timepoints ie, assessment help etc.

Advice for other academics from module leader

- + Don’t label a session as a ‘mental health’ event, as students are not always attracted to that type of session. They might not think it’s relevant to them, and this decreases attendance. It works well to combine academic skills and wellbeing.
- + Empower students by supporting them to build networks and make connections across the department by working closely with student representatives and societies.
- + Work with centralised college services in-house to tailor sessions specifically for specific cohort of students.

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