

Education for mental health case study

One month field trip

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Context

Observational research was conducted on two third-year Geology residential field trips to further explore students' and lecturers' experiences. Additionally, and to explore the topic further, focus groups were held with academic staff and Student Support Services to better understand the relationship between field trips and mental health. From our research, two main considerations relating to field trips were observed: influences on student wellbeing and student behaviour.

Outcomes of module

Key module information	
Typical intake	Approx. 20 students
Format*	Residential one-month field trip in June 2021
Level of study	The field trip was in the rural Welsh countryside
Status	Third-year undergraduate students
Credited	Fieldwork was a compulsory requirement of the course
Assessment	1 assessed verbally during the field trip 2 a written report after the field trip.
Assessment feedback	Verbal during the field trip and written feedback after the field trip
Location	Wales – 15 days in North Wales and 15 days in South Wales
Teaching staff	Lecturers
Duration/frequency	Once during the three-year degree

*This field trip was under unusual circumstances (It was a longer field trip duration than usual, due to Covid-19 restrictions).

Challenges

Academic staff and University Student Services need to consider several different aspects before taking students out on a field trip, such as risk assessments, accommodation, and transportation. Additional considerations should also be made in relation to students on medication, with limited mobility or with a diagnosed is of a range of different disorders such as Autistic Spectrum Conditions, Anxiety and OCD. However, from our research two main considerations about field trips were observed.

Influences on student wellbeing during field trips

According to our research, wellbeing could be influenced by numerous things when students are on a field trip. Academic staff reported students often become anxious before they start field trips, due to leaving their family and friends and feeling outside their comfort zone due to the uncertainty of the field trip (such as the location, activities or being away from home). Additionally, the staff had supported students with a range of wellbeing issues on the field trip, such as panic attacks, personal issues, and homesickness.

Further influences on wellbeing that were reported and observed were students often dealing with everyday issues when on the field trip, such as relationship issues etc, which can sometimes affect the dynamics of the group. Academics are often faced with students that are upset and anxious about a variety of personal issues. Further to this, academics reported experiences of some students having no previously declared anxiety issues, for whom these emerged whilst on the field trip.

Our research found that there have been reports of students feeling isolated and even suicidal during field trips. These feelings of isolation and homesickness from family and friends resulted in negative wellbeing for some students and academics perceived a link between where the field trip was held and being able to contact their family and friends, (eg, having limited phone reception or WIFI).

Academics supported students that were reporting feelings of isolation and homesickness and tried to contact family and friends if students were struggling. These issues of isolation and/or loneliness were reported by the students to be related to the limited social time they experienced whilst on the field trip, as there were limited opportunities for the students to engage in social activities or social events in the evenings. The students reported that in the evenings they were often expected to catch up with work.

The academics supported all the students and the student that felt suicidal during the field trip was further supported by the Student Services at the University and relevant external agencies.

Other elements that influenced the students' wellbeing were also reported, such as, long very intense days with limited free time. The long days were tough and physically demanding in difficult terrain and then in the evening, students were often expected to write up their results. Our research found that students were getting exhausted with full days and more opportunities for breaks were needed. Long days can have implications for wellbeing and mental health, as well as for physical and mental exhaustion, and it can easily lead to fatigue and burnout. (1)

Another influencing factor was the type of work that was being done on the field trip, for example, independent or group work. Independent work was lonely with long days, whereas group work had long days, but was more sociable. However, some students preferred to work alone and flourished in the independent element of the work.

Furthermore, some students felt a little anxious about rural the location of the field trips was and how it was vastly different from the city life that they were used to. They said it took a few days to get used to, as there were fewer people, fewer shops and less going on all the time.

Student behaviour on the field trip

Student behaviour on field trips can sometimes influence the experience and wellbeing of the staff and students. Our research discovered that some students saw the field trip as a holiday and not as being part of their degree, and consequently were not focusing on the work on the field trip.

In the focus groups, the academic staff also highlighted that there have been some previous issues related to experiences with students drinking whilst on field trips. Students had gone out drinking and socialising in the evenings after fieldwork and ended up having to go to hospital due to being in a fight or sleeping outside. Academic staff felt an added pressure when the students went out drinking due to the fact that they would be held partly responsible if a crime was committed by a student. Overall, from the academics' experiences, alcohol has been a triggering factor for criminal activities when on field trips.

Additionally, students did not always consider their health issues; hence they might forget to look after their health, and this could become detrimental to students' health and wellbeing, so the academic staff reported having to 'play a sort of parent role.' For example, academic have experienced during the field trips; students forgetting to take their medication, students becoming dehydrated due to not drinking enough water, and students not wearing suitable footwear/clothing for the weather.

Advice for other academics from module leader

Advice for academics before the field trip

- + **Preparing students for what they may expect during the field trip.** For example, limited WIFI access or rural location of the field trip (ie, prepared that there may be limited WIFI access to contact with friends and family and the location will be rural with limited amenities). To prepare students, handouts about the field trip could be given, a seminar with a Q&A about the field trip or a student from a previous year speaking about their experiences on the field trip.
- + **Workshops (integrated into the students learning)** about the importance of self-care, stress awareness and emotion management. (Fit within the classroom work)
- + **Booking appropriate student accommodation.** Considering where the accommodation is booked. A quieter environment away from the 'party towns' decreases the problems related to students drinking too much alcohol or getting in trouble.
- + **Further training about wellbeing to further support academics**, for instance, the [Charlie Waller e-learning website](#). Training/staff education on how to deal with different situations or what type of things may be a trigger for anxiety and depression. For example, Psychoeducation for students and academic staff (eg, Delivered by experts within Student Services to support the staff and students) to open up avenues of support and conversation. Also, being aware that one approach does not fit all, and different field trips may need different training or support.

Advice for academics during the field trip

- + **Talking to students.** Sometimes just having a chat with the students can support their wellbeing.
- + **Social time and breaks.** Social activities during the field trip to help the students feel less isolated. Spend some time doing a fun activity during the field trips (such as BBQ at the beach). Additionally, including more breaks during the field trips.

References

- 1 Iskera-golec I, Folkard S, Marek T, Noworol C. Health, well-being and burnout of ICU nurses on 12-and 8-h shifts. *Work & Stress*. 1996 Jul 1; 10 (3): 251-6.

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