

# Engaging students to support inclusive cultural change

Case study 9 – Wellbeing Champions

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University of Brighton

## 1. About the project

The Collaborative Development Fund supports the development of our members by addressing key sector challenges together, through a series of innovative projects. Topics are co-created with the sector and projects aim to highlight different approaches, in different contexts, to support members to understand how practice might be learned from and applied. Awards are made based on the expertise of teams and the evidence and the relevance to sector-wide practice from an open call for submissions.

Working collaboratively across six University Alliance universities in England, this project, led by Kingston University, explores the key attributes of student engagement programmes which support meaningful, far-reaching, and sustained transformation to a more inclusive higher education,

Research indicates that students who actively engage with their university through not only their academic curricula, but also co-curricular activities are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve better outcomes (Thomas, 2012). However, not all university students engage with their institutions to the same degree. These groups include mature students and those who are first generation to higher education, students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as those from lower socio-economic households.

This case study forms part of a project that aims to surface the work of various student engagement programmes in six higher education institutions in England which have been developed to support inclusivity in their universities.

### 1.1. Summary section

This case study surfaces an initiative that universities may wish to consider. It was designed by the University of Brighton with the intention of helping to better understand how to transform and enable inclusive cultures and ways of working in higher education through a programme which engages students in leading conversations about good mental wellbeing while supporting the University mental health and wellbeing services to become more inclusive and culturally responsive through engagement with a wider range of students.

### 1.2. Name of programme and university

Wellbeing Champions, University of Brighton

### 1.3. What is the programme trying to achieve?

The programme aims to promote social bonding, reduce stigma around mental health and create a supportive community within the University of Brighton, normalising discussions of mental health and wellbeing amongst students. It was also designed to increase the engagement of students in University wellbeing services who may benefit from this support, but currently do not access it. The idea is that through peer-to-peer dialogue, the barriers that exist for students in accessing the professional services at the University would be broken down. Bedi (2018)<sup>1</sup> found that white students were more likely to respond to existing mental health support systems, as these are more consistent with the world views of white students. Kalkbrenner et al. (2010)<sup>2</sup> found a significant ethnicity x help-seeking history interaction effect, with white students more likely to refer peers on to counselling.

Student Wellbeing Champions from underrepresented ethnicities were encouraged to apply, and the job was additionally promoted to our student inclusive practice partners (IPPs) with a view to breaking any stigma and normalising help-seeking behaviours across our diverse student population. Wellbeing Champions act as role models in our student population, having conversations about mental health and help-seeking. Wellbeing Champions create events and activities encouraging conversations about mental health and the reduction of stigma around mental wellbeing. Students deliver workshops that have been co-created with the Mental Health Foundation discussing various issues that affect student wellbeing. The students are also in dialogue with the professional university wellbeing services around provision of wellbeing support at the university. Student Wellbeing Champions use their own

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<sup>1</sup> Bedi, R. P. (2018). Racial, ethnic, cultural, and national disparities in counseling and psychotherapy outcome are inevitable but eliminating global mental health disparities with indigenous healing is not. *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, 6(1), 96–104. <https://doi.org/10.1037/arc0000047>

<sup>2</sup> Kalkbrenner, M. T., Sink C. A. and Smith J. L. (2010). Mental Health Literacy and Peer-to-Peer Counseling Referrals Among Community College Students. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 98 (2020), 172-182. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12311>

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lived experience and personal expertise to feed into training of the counselling team and to create written support materials around the subject of eating disorders.

### 1.4. Who is involved?

Launched in September 2021, the programme is led by the Student Support and Guidance Coordinator in Student Operations and Support who reports to Head of Wellbeing. It currently has eight student recruits. All students can apply for the roles, although applicants are particularly welcomed from males and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, given current underrepresentation.

### 1.5. Impacts and Achievements

The programme was only launched in September 2021, so it is early days, but to date over 250 students have participated in events. These events have been successful in destigmatising issues of mental health unwellness and have opened up opportunities for supportive positive conversations amongst the University community.

Whilst the programme is open to all students, it has attracted students with diagnosed mental health conditions, which has ensured its authenticity. Continued funding has been agreed, which reflects its added value.

### 1.6. Quotes

“It was lovely to feel supported by the group leaders to share our thoughts, and to see that a lot of us had similar experiences surrounding the behaviours on wellbeing. I walked away from this workshop with more self-awareness on my behaviours and I now have some ideas on how to improve my health and wellbeing.” – Anon

### 1.7. This case study exemplifies the following toolkit attributes:

#### Intentional

This programme is intentional in its focus on engaging students in conversations about mental wellbeing, thereby destigmatising debates on mental health with the intention of improving mental resilience and wellbeing while ensuring that these conversations are valued within the University.

#### Authentic

This programme has succeeded in recruiting students who have diagnosed mental health issues, which ensures that the participants can facilitate genuine, meaningful and informed discussions about mental wellbeing, and also feel more connected to and valued within the University community in themselves.



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