



The Wellbeing of Disability Professionals in the Further and Higher Education Institution Workplace

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National Association of Disability Practitioners



NADP is the professional association for members of staff at colleges and universities working with disabled students. Our 1500 members include:

- Disability and inclusivity managers,
- Disability advisers,
- Those in individual support either within the institution or externally
- Academic staff working inclusively with students

Membership includes staff from most universities and many colleges in the United Kingdom, as well as several from Europe and across the world.

<https://nadp-uk.org/>

Background

- Institute for Public Policy Research (2017)
 - 2015/16, over 15,000 first-year students in UK universities disclosed that they had a mental health problem, compared to approximately 3,000 in 2006.
- Paul Gorczynski (2018) University of Portsmouth
 - 43% of academic staff exhibited symptoms of, at least, a mild mental disorder, nearly twice the prevalence rate in the general population.
- No comparable research has focussed on professional services staff. However:
 - The increase in number of disabled students attending university
 - The rise in complexity of conditions
 - Number of students that disability professionals personally oversee, grown tremendously
 - Baseline provision document produced by HEFCE in 1999 recommended a maximum ratio of 1:200 (disability staff:disabled students)
 - An NADP survey in February 2020 carried out via email quoted current ratios of up to 1:750.

Research

This study was designed as an initial survey aimed to examine disability professionals' experiences of stress in the workplace and measures universities have employed to support them

- A confidential survey presented to the NADP Membership at the beginning of March 2020
- Survey designed to measure a range of subjective and objective indicators to build up a rounded picture of the experiences of disability professionals and the impact of those experiences.
- Objective measures of wellbeing included indicators of workload and facilities provided by the institution.
- Subjective wellbeing measures included the general evaluation of disability professionals quality of life (after, Deiner & Ryan, 2009).

The Physical Workplace

Illustrative quotations are presented here anonymously without changes to spelling or grammar.

- 'Working conditions aren't great- lack of private spaces in which to see students.' (4831)
- 'Less dead rat rotting smell from underfloor vents.' (4832)
- 'a redecorate would be great for moral- support services are often left to the last in these projects and the offices look shabby- doesn't show value.' (4829)
- 'dedicated rooms to teach with windows and natural light. offices that are confidential ie sound proof' (4857)
- 'Windows that open, less noisy and frantic open plan office.' (4832)
- 'providing healthier food in the university canteen (where currently chips are served every day, and there is sometimes no other hot carbohydrate option available).' (4856)
- 'don't have any showers - tbh, the toilets barely work so a shower is beyond asking' (4862)

Atmosphere in the Workplace

- 'Good amongst colleagues but a feeling of disconnect with senior managers.' (4880)
- 'there is a definite divide between management and rest of staff.' (4864)
- 'I am concerned about the pressure she [line manager] may be under.' (4861)
- 'If the 'main' boss is in, then the atmosphere is tense...' (4859)
- 'very compassion 'light' i get the impression that they think we're all skivving [*sic*].' (4848)
- 'Stressed- although the teams are very strong and work well together, there is a lot of pressure.' (4846)
- 'There is often a feeling of lack of recognition from senior leadership for the work we do.' (4836)

Workload

- 'I regularly take work home because there is barely enough time in the day to do the bread and butter tasks.' (4853)
- 'I think I have to do at least 7-10 extra hours per week and up to 15 hours excess at peak times. It is expected or I cannot get my job done.' (4868)
- 'between September and December approximately 5-9 hours extra per week; possible 3-6 hours per week extra January – May' (4866)
- 'I try to carefully manage my work life balance but end up working late and at weekends to try to stay on top of the most urgent priorities' (4869)
- 'the workload always falls on the colleagues who are not off sick so it seems that they always do double the work for the same salary' (4834)
- 'Abusive and vexacious [*sic*] calls and complaints have become daily expectations for Managers in Disability Services to respond to and this culture must change' (4879)

Financial Insecurity in the Sector

- 'My immediate Manager... is limited with actions due to budgetary restrictions.' (4879)
- 'Hire a full complement of staff at appropriate pay grades' (4856)
 - 'Admin support, reception support and proper confidential system for storing information.' (4854)
- 'Employing more people!' (4845)
- 'Have a smaller caseload' (4862)
- 'By investing in a comprehensive CRM system instead of the partial one we currently have' (4869)
- 'invest in efficiency through up-to-date technological systems for databases and communications' (4878)

Institutional Solutions

- 'It is soul destroying as a manager to worry about the wellbeing of staff when you have no power to change the situation.' (4869)
- 'They SAY that they do, and the University has various 'awards' (e.g. Time to Change pledge etc). but this is not put into practice.' (4872)
 - 'They pay lipservice to staff wellbeing but they do not fully appreciate the emotional toll of what we do...' (4867)
 - 'it's very generic like 'try this app, or that app' (4860)
 - 'Our wellbeing is an 0800 number, which I didn't find very useful.' (4859)
 - 'I would like to see more effort done to reduce workloads - email holidays, proper discussions on triaging enquiries etc.' (4863)
 - 'Mindfulness, meditation and stress reduction are always helpful but that puts the responsibility back on the individual to manage themselves which is only part of the equation.' (4831)
 - 'I don't like to think that all my life outside of work is about balancing of the effects of work.' (4829)

Direct Support offered to Staff

Only 23% of respondents felt confident about accessing direct support from their institution with 17% stating that they definitely could not do so. Others relied on colleagues at work, their professional association or family and friends.

The reluctance to access help on offer appears to come from the idea that disability professionals should already have strategies and they would be revealing a professional weakness should they need external assistance.

- 'I feel the role we do suggests we should be able to manage our stress/mental health' (4871)

When it works well

- 'I feel we've got a lot of support available: staff wellbeing sessions, opportunities to discuss our work and feelings, meditation and yoga sessions for people that want them. Workloads are manageable, employment conditions are flexible and allow for a good work/life balance.' (4876)
- 'they appreciate that interactions with students can be challenging so encourage staff to have debriefs with colleagues or go for a walk/cup of tea after a difficult appointment, they also arrange regular supervisor for us.' (4871)
- 'It's a no blame culture. People help each other if things are difficult.' (4865)
- 'provision of outside wellbeing support as well as access to internal support.' (4850)
- 'Accepting, non-judgemental, trusting, respectful, kind, encourages initiative, supports development and brings out the best in people.' (4847)
- 'we're very lucky to have such a great team and supportive line management.' (4829)

Recommendations: Change Management

Institutions review their process of change management.

Change is an inevitable part of ensuring that any business is viable. Educational institutions must be prepared to move with the times and adjust their operations in response to increased competition, technological advances, student expectations and other pressures. Disability professionals generally appear to understand and accept this. However, this change should be the result of a structured and planned process to make the institution more efficient and profitable.

Universities have spent a lot of time looking at the outcome and developing detailed plans, but they do not appear to have taken the steps to ensure the changes are smoothly implemented. A major part of the process is making sure the change is adopted by the people who are affected by it. Without proper buy-in, there is a risk that employees will reject or even sabotage the change project, resulting in wasted time and money.

Mobilising people's interests and enthusiasm and working to manage the emotional impact of change can help to reduce fear and anxiety and ensure the new goals are embraced.

Recommendations: Working Conditions

The Department for Education consider recommendations for addressing the working conditions of disability professionals.

This initial research has revealed deep concerns over the working conditions at some institutions with reports of overworked staff who are feeling undervalued. Some of the working conditions are very worrying with lack of privacy for student concerns and unsanitary environments. It would be possible to move quickly on addressing some of these issues and improving staff wellbeing if recommendations were produced for minimum working standards.

These should include:

- a. Working environment (privacy, security, cleanliness of environment)
- b. Ratio of disabled students to staff
- c. Professional accreditation and CPD recommendations

Recommendations: Further Research

The survey produced examples of good practice from several universities with disability professionals reporting high levels of wellbeing and job satisfaction.

This contrasted to staff from many other universities who reported poor working conditions and wellbeing.

NADP is well-placed to continue to phase two of the research which would work to elucidate the reasons for these contrasts with the aim of producing an accurate picture of current conditions in the sector and generating a positive model for change.

References

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