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Supporting Research Students During COVID-19: Sharing Good Practice from Essex

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Session Outline

- Context of supporting staff - including research students
- Time to Write
- Coaching
- Looking ahead

CONTEXT



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Context for us in HE

- The impact on our lives and work as staff and students in higher education may not be disputed. The psychological impact is yet to be fully scrutinised.
 - The rapid shift to remote teaching meant increased workload for many
 - Job insecurity is high
 - Stress and anxiety levels are much higher
 - Work-life Balance is disturbed
- Pre-pandemic data on research students suggests high levels of anxiety that are well above the UK population (AdvanceHE, 2019).

Wellbeing support at Essex

- A strategic objective to maintain and improve staff and students' wellbeing and mental health
- Our approach is based on
 - Maintaining the level of support in the pre-pandemic period
 - Encouraging a human-centred approach to the pandemic by focusing on the importance of genuine peer support
 - Fostering a sense of community of practice



TIME TO WRITE



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Collaborative initiative

- Library Services and Organisational Development
- Already collaborating on Thesis Writing Boot Camp
- Triggered by cancellation of scheduled Boot Camp at onset of first lockdown

Responding to lockdown

Thesis Bootcamp

- In-person writing retreat
- 3-day intensive writing
- Twice a year
- Focus on writing only
- Strict time limits
- Compulsory active break each afternoon

Time to Write

- Virtual (Zoom & Slack)
- 2 days / week (April – Aug)
- 1 day / week (term time)
- Focus on support and creating a sense of community
- Structured day (incl. active break each afternoon)



Time to Write Schedule

Duration	Activity	Purpose
15 mins	Morning coffee	Meet socially, share experiences
1 hr	Interview / strategies for writing/reading efficiently	Explore new ways of working – input, group discussions
2.5 hrs	Intensive Writing 1	Focus on doctorate
1 hr	Lunch – check in	Meet socially, share wider experiences
1 hr	Intensive Writing 2	Focus on doctorate
45 mins	Active Break – (share images to Slack)	Wellbeing
1.5 hrs	Intensive Writing 3	Focus on doctorate
15-20 mins	Group de-brief	Encourage, review goals

Feedback

- “It felt like a big family”
- “The course has been a real life line for me”
- “The facilitators were really supportive, interested, and helpful”
- “I was able to really focus on my writing”
- “It will help me develop a process of ongoing self-directed writing retreats

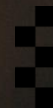


What did we learn?

- Attendees have gone on to set up their own writing retreats
- We have passed on good practice to other colleagues
- Helped our own wellbeing



COACHING



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Coaching for early career researchers

The programme aims to improve researchers' wellbeing and mental health with impact on continuation and outcomes.

- An opportunity to talk, independently from their academic department and supervisors
- The programme includes:
 - general coaching that is open to all PGR students
 - pre-and post viva coaching
- Students offered up to two one-hour coaching sessions over a period of six months
- Matched to appropriate coach via a pre-coaching information sheet
- Coaches pool includes academics and professional services staff

Emerging themes

- Pre-pandemic themes:
 - The relationship and expectations between students and supervisors
 - Issues around self-doubt, confidence and motivation
 - Issues around fears of failure and examination worries
 - Issues around progress and time management
- Post-pandemic themes:
 - Loneliness
 - Sense of lack of engagement/ support from supervisors
 - Lack of motivation
 - Higher levels of stress and lack of control

Group Coaching for Educators Programme

- Started in October 2020 (78 participated so far)
- Open to all academic staff
- Combine the benefits of coaching with effective professional development through:
 - a personalised experience
 - collaborative learning
 - contextualised and practice-oriented development

Group Coaching for Educators Programme

- Addresses **the lack of time and extremely busy schedules** by only requiring attending two sessions (two hours each) per term
- Combating **the sense of being more isolated** by offering staff the opportunity to build a network of contacts for support with colleagues who share similar interests
- Focusing on **problem solving dialogues** to address challenges within the Essex context
- Supporting **resilience building** to deal with the change and uncertainty through a personalised approach to share challenges and receive feedback in an authentic, safe and confidential environment

Group Coaching for Educators Programme

- Group coaching sessions are thematically categorised based on the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF, AdvanceHE, 2011)
 - Assessment and Feedback
 - Delivery and supporting learning
 - Design and planning of teaching and learning
 - Developing effective learning environments
- Minimal preparation time
- Opportunity to talk and reflect with colleagues from across the university
- Optional reflection sheet to use to reflect on your learning

LOOKING AHEAD



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What still needs to be done?

- Promote the importance of wellbeing
- Increase engagement with Time to Write
- Embed a coaching culture
- Explore options for cross-institutions coaching initiatives

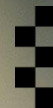


ANY QUESTIONS?

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