



Support staff are more than signposts for students in distress

While university administrative staff often encounter troubled students, they lack the training to help them, says Sarah Bones

I never expected to feel that I was letting students down when I joined my local university's support staff in 2009.

I had sailed through my studies in a cloud of naivety, not once reflecting that others' paths to graduation could be so littered with stumbling blocks that they wouldn't make it through without a very big helping hand.

As concerns about student mental health escalate in the midst of this pandemic and interaction moves online, I worry that it may be harder than ever for university staff to offer that hand.

I started working for the university's biggest department, spending hours each day face to face with young adults from all over the world, trying to assuage their fears or facilitate some kind of change in their study pattern.

But as hard as I tried, I was often left with a lingering sense of unease about whether I had really given them what they needed. I felt confident in pursuing the practicalities of what I saw as my personal mission to get them through their degrees, but when it came to supporting those with mental health difficulties, I often felt woefully inadequate.

As I moved over the years from larger academic departments to smaller ones, my unease only grew. I noticed an increase in students confiding in administrative staff about mental health problems that were severely affecting their studies, yet none of us had received any training or advice on how to

field such queries. It seemed that senior managers were no more cognisant than I had initially been about the fact that an administrator might be the first person a troubled student would have the courage to confide in.

The university had a central well-being team to help with mental health, but every time I directed a student there, I noticed a disappointed and resigned look in their eyes. Language and cultural barriers often exacerbated things, with some international students having no understanding of what a well-being team was, and even the domestic students clearly expected more from me. Now they would have to repeat their story to a

well-being adviser before being given access to a trained counsellor.

I could imagine that it must have seemed like too many hoops to jump through for a weary and vulnerable student.

Yet, sometimes, students came across as not so much vulnerable as threatening. As a deputy departmental manager, I worked with other administrators in an open-plan office, into which students could walk freely. The idea was to encourage a friendly and inviting atmosphere, but sometimes students were angry about the struggles they were facing and there was nothing to stop them projecting their frustrations and indignations on to us, leaving us feeling exposed.

I encountered students struggling with stress, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, personality disorder, anger issues and eating disorders. I recall mentioning a few times to my superiors that it would be handy to receive training in how to effectively handle a student bursting with rage, trembling with fear or sobbing their heart out, but it never came to anything.

My final role at the university was an intense eight months as a case worker in the students' union advice centre. My job was to help students with issues such as finances, housing, immigration, academic progression, appeals and complaints and, of course, well-being. But while I received extensive training on the visa system, I still had none on mental health – despite the fact that we spent just as much time dealing with the latter as the former.

Among other challenges, I found myself trying to manage the changeable emotions of a regular client with personality disorder.

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I struggled with the ethics of helping a student who had threatened to stab others to remain on his course. Meanwhile, a colleague watched a student who had come off his psychosis medication spend his appointment with her disassembling a pen, as if he meant to harm her with it. He did not want to be referred to the well-being team; he wanted help there and then. So did a young lady who came flying into reception fighting for breath in the midst of a panic attack.

I left the students' union last year, before the pandemic struck. But I hear the reports of rising mental ill health among students and I feel for them. I also feel for all the university staff whom those students approach for help, wholly unprepared to offer what they need (especially as those staff struggle to manage their own mental health amid the necessity for social distancing).

Staff trying to reassure troubled students online may feel less exposed than we did in our open-plan office, but they are in an even worse position to help them. Sometimes that face-to-face exchange with someone who listens with empathy and understanding is all a panicked student needs to feel more hopeful about their problems.

University support staff are often told that theirs is only a signposting role, but university managers must wise up to the fact that the reality is frequently very different.

At a time when students from around the globe have been cooped up in their rooms for months wondering how to get help, it is more necessary than ever to ensure that those they do approach have the training to give them what they need.

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