



Strand E Case Study – Developing Wellbeing Content for the Professional Development of Research Supervisors

Lead: Ben Marshall, Student Services, University of East Anglia (Benjamin.Marshall@uea.ac.uk) and Matthew Sillence, Lecturer in Postgraduate Education and Training, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of East Anglia (m.sillence@uea.ac.uk)

A) Overview

A key area of work within the Courage Project was standardising and supporting the supervisory relationship in order to make these instrumental mechanisms support doctoral researchers better. Content was developed by the strand lead, agreed with the module coordinator and fed into the relevant professional development module for supervisors. Initial co-delivered sessions have been positively received, with full module evaluation pending.

B) Action taken

Under the supervisor support and training strand of the project, it was decided that in addition to standalone content, some material on supporting wellbeing in researchers should be integrated into the Masters Degree in Higher Education Practice, delivered by UEA's Centre for Staff and Educational Development (CSED). This is a course that new academic staff must take in their initial years of joining the institution. One elective module developed under the Courage Project focuses on 'Postgraduate Research Supervision and Examination' (see separate case study for details of this module). After consultation with CSED staff, and particular consideration of recent guidelines from the UK Council for Graduate Education, the Courage Project Student Services Lead designed content for the 'Transition and Support' sessions within this module and co-delivered these with the module convenor Matthew Sillence.

In this session, the following wellbeing-related themes were added and discussed:

- Reflecting on and developing boundaries in supervision
- Communication and active planning around wellbeing in supervision
- Creating resilience in the supervisory relationship

These were followed by an activity that attempted to bring these themes together via the practical tool of Wellness Action Planning (WAP). Session participants were given time to consider a WAP as if they were embarking on a new supervisory arrangement with a supervisor, and write down key details relating to their wellbeing (it was made clear that participants could disclose their own mental health issues in a safe environment, but that they were also free to complete the task by playing the role of someone they had supported in the past if they preferred). They considered what they and the supervisor could do to support, prevent problems arising and respond to any problems once these did occur.

Following this participants formed pairs and took turns to take one of two roles: supervisee or supervisor. Supervisees took the supervisor through the plan, highlighting any reasonable modifications they might need and discussing these. Supervisors focussed on active listening (including monitoring their body language, repeating key information, summarising and asking thoughtful questions). They also paid careful attention to boundaries and making clear what the supervisee could expect from them, and what might need to be supported through other routes. Together the pairs carefully negotiated agreement on a plan of action for resilience in the supervisory relationship in each case, before swapping roles to attempt the same again.

C) Impacts and outcomes

Assessing impact

The integration of wellbeing into the Transition and Support session on Module 7 has had a number of impacts, both within the peer group of the module itself, but also in considering the continuing professional development for supervisors at both novice and experienced levels across the institution as a whole.

What happened? Outcomes, Surprising impacts?

Concerns about student wellbeing were in fact raised in the first seminar in October 2019, as novice supervisors had already heard about the challenges of undertaking a PhD in higher education at present, and that the academic pressure, coupled with other circumstances could lead to very serious problems. This was quite different to the pilot of this module last year, where personal challenges were acknowledged, but generally at a later stage in the module.

It is likely that publicity around the Courage Project at the University has raised awareness of the role of wellbeing for supervisors before they registered for the module.

What worked well / not - overcoming challenges?

At an individual level, within the module, the opportunity to practice active listening with the Wellness Action Plan was clearly beneficial for supervisors. By answering the questions within the plan they were able to reflect on their own challenges within an academic role at the University, in particular identifying specific signs that

their physical and mental state was affecting their interactions with colleagues and students, and the quality of their work. One academic noticed that the language of his e-mails had changed when under pressure – often becoming terse. He also noticed that his energy levels were negatively affected by frequent contact with people in meetings and office hours, so periodic breaks and ‘headspace’ time were a high priority.

Although some academics responded well to open conversations about their work, behaviours and attitudes, the mid-module evaluation revealed that a degree of familiarity and trust is important. One academic noted ‘[d]iscussing mental health/wellbeing easier with people you have met 3 or 4 times, rather than 1st time (I appreciate you could discuss someone else but more difficult).’

There was also a call to involve more concrete examples of issues that students face: ‘[m]aybe some case studies of issues/problems faced by particular students, especially at UEA (context specific) at different stages of their PhD.’ Although fictional case studies have been used effectively in the continuing professional development of supervisors (Eley and Jennings 2005), there are serious ethical implications of discussing specific cases as part of the module content as confidentiality is an important principle of the MA HEP programme.

Recommendations for future use, and other unis: What do differently / for next time?

In future versions of the module, it would be advisable to set up activities in earlier sessions that allow colleagues to build trusting relationships, and possibly to deploy the wellness action plan exercise in a later session. This may allow academic staff to be more comfortable with exploring similar questions with their own students.

The emphasis on student wellbeing supports the reflective ethos of the MA in Higher Education Practice, and it is clear that the Courage interventions for supervisors provide a productive space to explore their own behaviours (self-awareness) and develop non-judgmental, person-oriented practices (active listening) (Sillence 2018). Jointly, these are applicable across supervisor continuing professional development at our own institution, but through at Masters level can be explored through theory and practice. The latter approach would support the UK Council for Graduate Education’s new National Recognition Programme for supervisors: <https://supervision.ukcge.ac.uk/> This programme is built around structured self-reflection, and therefore more experienced academics could provide evidence of their practice nationally (Taylor 2016).

REFERENCES

Eley, Adrian R., and Roy Jennings. 2005. *Effective Postgraduate Supervision: Improving the Student-Supervisor Relationship*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

- Sillence, Matthew. 2018. 'B7 - Postgraduate Research Supervision through a Problem/Person Lens'. Vitae Annual Conference 17-18 September 2018, Birmingham, UK. <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/events/past-events/vitae-researcher-development-international-conference-2018/workshops/WorkshopB7>.
- Taylor, Stan. 2016. 'UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) Dimensions of the Framework for Doctoral Supervisors'.