Supervisor, student and supervisor-student report under Strand E

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A) Overview

National and institutional-level research indicates that supervisory relationships are instrumental in postgraduate researcher (PGR) wellbeing (see Watson, 2018 for a summary; UEA Students' Union, 2015). Strand E of the Courage Project was devised to meet the need for supervisor upskilling via training. This moved to a broader 'support' focus over time in response to demand.

B) Action taken and C) Impacts and outcomes

In response to the clear indication for the need for supervisor upskilling in the pastoral elements of supervision, the student services strand lead wrote a taught piece of training. This covered the nature of PGR mental health, definitions of mental health and wellbeing, signs and symptoms, and key aspects to avoid in the supervisory relationship. A trial version was delivered to staff at the university of Suffolk (N = approx. 60), and an adapted version to a small group of Courage project postgraduate researchers (N=8). Associate Deans and PGR Directors at UEA (N= 20) were also given a training overview.

Feedback to both pieces of training was generally positive, with staff liking in particular the evidence-based approach and the opportunity to consider an understated factor of the university experience. They liked the fact that the training clarified roles of staff somewhat, but thought this could be expanded upon. PGR participants were generally positive but highlighted the need for more active skills training for supervisors alongside knowledge of fundamentals. In response to this a revised package was devised by the student services lead with a small panel of expert consultants from communication sciences, psychology, health sciences and philosophy, all of whom were experienced supervisors and one of whom had lived experience of mental health issues:

- A shortened taught session

- A communication workshop in which participants have a chance to practice supportive communication and become acquainted with principles like active listening, respectful electronic communication and disclosure.
- Two new resources for supervisors to draw upon in supervisory practice:
  - A quick reference guide for 'who does what for wellbeing' with simple and clear crisis guidance included.
  - A revised action plan for postgraduate research supervision (based upon an existing evidence-based document developed by Copeland (2018) issued as a free resource by the charity Mind, but expanded to include material from the project's research on PGR wellbeing and 'stress risk assessments')

Two further trials (N = 15) with volunteer supervisors, as well as various supervisees approaching the student services and student union strand leads with individual difficulties when they delivered elements of the project, yielded two key further areas of need for development:
- Customised 1:1 support for individual issues experienced with the supervisory relationship. As such a fifth element was added to the proposed package – the student services lead began implementing office hours (5h a week) in which:
  - Individual students with substantial difficulties (e.g. existing mental health conditions) could be seen.
  - Individual supervisors could consult on best practice
  - The lead could attend key review meetings to offer mediation and support with any supervisory relationships in danger of breaking down.
- All of the above feeding into work on wider institutional issues that emerged from the project, and not 'masking' institutional flaws.

Both elements were thus implemented (see below for extra impacts of the latter).

Assessing impact

The package developed, and indications of its effectiveness, whilst developed iteratively and revised several times in response to feedback (see above), yet should be considered preliminary until whole-school trials have been done with full pre- and post-training outcome measures. The planned whole school trial was disrupted by university industrial action and will now take place in January.

Surprising impacts?

(See above for the items of unanticipated feedback and response to the training and how this was responded to as part of an iterative development process for the training).

NB: the close attention to 'wider institutional issues' paid (across the training and wider project) has yielded a few further outcomes of particular note:

- Revision of practice around hardship funds to better accommodate PGRs.
- Revision (currently underway) of the reasonable adjustments procedural paperwork to ensure this accounts well for the PGR experience.
- (feedback on the need for revision of engagement procedures was also received, but the PGR service had already scheduled a review of these).

What worked well / not - overcoming challenges?

Uptake of the revised training package has been limited, with two schools signing up for implementation despite repeated approaches of others, but not until 2020.

The Academic Head of the Doctoral College has worked closely with the Strand Lead and (after discussion and feedback) and recently laid down plans to make the training component mandatory, allowing a whole-university trial (ethical approval for this has already been gained) in 2020.

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

It is suggested that other institutions carefully consider a formalisation of the wellbeing component of the PGR supervision they deliver. In particular, preliminary evidence from this project indicates this should address:
- Upskilling
- Clear information on role expectancies
- Active, participatory practice of key communication skills
- 1:1 support

REFERENCES

Copeland, M. E. (2018). *WRAP Info Center*. Retrieved from https://mentalhealthrecovery.com/info-center/