

# Student-led Peer Support Wellbeing Programme

Examples of Practice, The Student Mental Health Evidence Hub

The Student Mental Health Project is an Office for Students (OfS) funded project that aims to help higher education providers develop their student mental health interventions. The project has developed a Student Mental Health Evidence Hub, a free resource consisting of an evidence-based toolkit, evaluation guidance, examples of practice and the results of our sector engagement and student panel work. The project was led by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) as part of a consortium with What Works Wellbeing, SMARteN, Student Minds and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.

This document contains an example of practice to support student mental health in higher education. This is one of a number of examples which have been collated as a result of calls to the sector issued by TASO. Please note that the information contained in these examples is not endorsed by TASO, and TASO has not been involved at any stage of intervention development, delivery or evaluation. We are grateful to the participating higher education providers for sharing information to facilitate the development of these examples.

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## Overview

<b>Higher Education Provider:</b>	Ulster University
<b>Intervention Title:</b>	Student-led Peer Support Wellbeing Programme
<b>Intervention Type:</b>	Peer Support
<b>Target Group:</b>	Targeted towards first-years/transitioning into university
<b>Date:</b>	December 2023

## Brief overview of the intervention

The Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programme at Ulster University supports first-year students' transition into higher education by involving second year students as mentors who facilitate weekly study sessions with first year students. PASS are primarily academic sessions in which first-year students set the agenda for each study session based on their own needs. PASS mentors share their experiences and facilitate confidential discussions.

While many students report benefiting from PASS, it was noted that engagement with PASS declined in the second semester. An evaluation was conducted in 2019 in which students reported that they would welcome a programme during their second semester that included strategies to enhance their wellbeing, develop coping skills and build resilience. The student feedback prompted the research team's to successfully apply for a grant from SMaRteN. The team then conducted an evaluation of a student-led peer support wellbeing programme in the academic year 20/21.

## Intervention approach

The PASS programme aims to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of students. In this project, additional wellbeing materials were designed, developed and implemented. The project evaluated the way that wellbeing materials were embedded in the PASS programme. The project's aims were to:

- Refine the PASS programme in order to improve student wellbeing.
- Involve undergraduate students in the design, development and delivery of the wellbeing sessions.
- Create wellbeing materials that PASS mentors could deliver successfully.

The project ran from in the academic years 19/20 to 20/21 and has subsequently been embedded in the PASS programme within the Department of Psychology. The weekly PASS programme was available to all first-year psychology students (n=165) and mentors (n=25) during Semester 2. PASS runs over the two teaching semesters and the numbers of mentors and mentees that participated in the wellbeing programme was higher than those included in this report. Only those that provided consent to the research process were included in this report as per ethical requirements.

This project involved two phases:

### **Phase 1**

In Semester 1, PASS mentors and mentees were surveyed to identify the top 12 wellbeing topics for inclusion in the wellbeing PASS programme. Topics included self-care, managing anxiety and stress, relationships, confidence, loneliness, and consent. The PowerPoint presentations were developed and finalised each week by the project team in collaboration with the mentors, which meant that feedback from prior sessions could be incorporated. Mentors reviewed the material and were given the opportunity to provide feedback. Each

presentation included an overview of the session's discussion topic, some real-life examples, audio or video components and activities to generate discussion.

## Phase 2

In Semester 2, trained PASS mentors delivered a 1-hour session over 12 weeks. The groups typically consisted of two mentors and approximately 12 mentees. All wellbeing sessions were delivered online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Weekly debrief sessions took place with the PASS mentors to gain feedback on the session they had delivered. Survey evaluations were administered to mentors and mentees to gain insight into the content of the sessions. This information was used to develop the remaining wellbeing sessions.

## Training

PASS mentor training is run by the School of Psychology and Ulster University Widening Access to Participation programme, before the start of the academic year. Training is delivered over one day. Continuous training also occurs throughout Semesters 1 and 2 as mentors attend weekly debrief sessions with their School's academic PASS co-ordinator.

## Resources required

The project team consisted of Dr Margaret McLafferty (Research Fellow) as Principle Investigator (PI), and Dr Kelly Norwood (Lecturer in Psychology) as PASS Coordinator. The PASS project team coordinated the intervention's implementation, delivery, evaluation, including a weekly debrief session with PASS mentors and weekly online feedback from mentees. PASS mentors, trained by the project team, delivered the sessions.

The cost of this project included £4940 spent on paying an independent researcher to evaluate the programme.

However, a substantial amount of time was allocated to the development and delivery of the programme by all involved. Training of the PASS mentors takes one day, prior to the beginning of the mentoring programme. Development of materials took approximately 36 hours of two staff members and mentor time. The delivery of 12 weekly sessions and debriefing sessions took approximately 24 hours of staff and mentor time. Mentors do not receive remuneration for their involvement. Once materials have been developed, it is cost effective to amend them for future cohorts.

## Intervention evaluation

To evaluate the wellbeing PASS programme, a mixed-methods study was conducted. The study's aims were to:

1. evaluate mentors and mentees levels of resilience, optimism, mental wellbeing;
2. assess the benefits and shortcomings of the programme from the mentor and mentee perspectives.

## Participants

Additional mentors and mentees were involved in the wellbeing programme as part of PASS. During recruitment it was made clear that although all mentors and mentees could benefit from the wellbeing programme, only data from those who consented to the design, development and evaluation would be included in the reported results. Overall, 14 mentors and 18 mentees consented to participate in the evaluation.

## Method

*Pre- and post- intervention questionnaires:* Changes in mentor and mentees' levels of resilience, optimism, hope, self-efficacy and mental wellbeing were evaluated via pre- and post-intervention questionnaires. Online weekly evaluations and qualitative interviews and focus groups after implementing the 12-week programme were also conducted. These were conducted with mentors and mentees.

*Weekly evaluation:* Following the weekly sessions, a link to an online evaluation was emailed to mentors and mentees separately. The students were:

- a. asked about the usefulness of the materials (e.g., if they felt the sessions helped them and what was most useful);
- b. invited to recommend improvements for implementation during their semester programme;
- c. asked whether they would recommend the sessions to a friend.

The students' feedback and recommendations from the evaluations and debrief sessions were incorporated into the sessions for the following weeks.

*Focus groups/interviews:* At the end of the 12-week programme, separate focus groups/interviews were held with mentors and mentees. Mentors and mentees were asked about the usefulness of the wellbeing materials, strengths and drawbacks and future improvements for the wellbeing programme. Mentors were also asked about ease of delivery. A researcher, with prior experience of facilitating focus group discussions, was employed to conduct the qualitative research. The researcher was independent of the staff team involved in the implementation of the PASS programme. Focus groups/interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and were audio recorded and transcribed and were analysed using Thematic Analysis.

## Results

Overall, 16 participants completed the pre-session survey and 11 completed (eight fully completed) the post-session survey at the end of the 12-week programme. The study revealed that from baseline to follow up, levels of resilience, optimism and overall mental wellbeing increased slightly. Levels of depression, anxiety and stress decreased.

Themes generated from the focus groups and interviews consisted of benefits, barriers and recommendations for future improvement for mentors and mentees, respectively. The benefits identified for mentors were self-efficacy, skills, and wellbeing. The benefits identified for mentees were peer support and wellbeing. One of the main barriers reported was that the sessions were held online due to the pandemic. It was initially planned to have these

delivered in-person and it has been recommended that future sessions should be held in the university setting or a blended approach is utilised.

Overall, mentors and mentees reported that they had benefited from the programme and recommended that it should continue. They reported that the sessions improved their wellbeing and that they had gained skills through their participation and involvement in the design and implementation of the programme. The project team has highlighted that it is difficult to determine the extent to which changes detected in the pre-and post-intervention questionnaires could be attributed to the wellbeing sessions. This is because when students completed the questionnaires at the start of Semester 2, a new COVID-19 lockdown had just been imposed which may have impacted on students' overall mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, only eight participants completed the follow up survey and due to the anonymous nature of the study, pre- and post-survey data could not be linked.

Therefore, the evaluations conducted thus far suggest that the intervention's aims may have been met. Nevertheless, because the intervention took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and numbers of participants in the evaluation were small, the conclusions one can draw about the effectiveness of the intervention are limited.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that the wellbeing programme be replicated and evaluated, particularly among other cohorts, across different third-level institutions. Moreover, it is recommended that long-term outcomes, such as attainment or progression, are measured.

## Next steps

The project team has written a report and presented the findings from the study at a number of conferences. The wellbeing PASS programme will continue to be implemented during Semester 2 in the School of Psychology at Ulster University. The project team hopes that the findings from this project will lead to the wellbeing sessions being introduced into other Schools within the University and into other higher education providers. The project team also hopes that by sharing findings and resources from the scheme other universities will be encouraged to undertake a wellbeing course such as this to help address the needs of their students.