STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This report summarises the key themes that were explored via a survey and then followed up with a series of focus groups. They discussed the outputs from the *Student Experience* roundtable discussion that took place at the CDN College Expo 2021. The focus groups were conducted in February 2022 and consisted of staff who were responsible for developing and implementing strategies to support students across the college sector.

To explore this complex topic, feedback was sought from the sector via a staff survey and focus groups. The findings from the data gathered are presented and discussed within this report.

Summary of findings

The findings from the survey provided insight into the many ways in which colleges are working towards meeting the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students. Colleges across Scotland have implemented a wide range of supports both on and off-campus, to ensure support is accessible (an extensive list can be found in **Appendix A)**. The focus groups allowed for a deeper dive into the ways in which colleges are evidencing the impact of the support provided. The findings from this also highlighted what is working well, and considered some barriers experienced by the sector. A summary of the findings is displayed below, under the following headings: *What is working well; What are the difficulties/barriers* and *what are the solutions?*

What is working well?

Feedback from the survey elicited a **wide range of supports** throughout Scotland's colleges that are offered both on-campus and online. The college counselling service was highlighted as the most impactful support offered by colleges. Respondents indicated that this support was accessible to students both on and off-campus. The other notable takeaway was the **volume** and **variety** of approaches implemented across the sector in both the physical and online space, with the majority being delivered on-campus.

Students are regularly being consulted to provide feedback and co-create strategies, which is having an impact on policies and interventions offered in Scotland's colleges. Colleges demonstrated an ability to act promptly on student feedback to develop initiatives, with examples including running awareness days and developing services based on student feedback.

Findings suggested that colleges may still be in the early stages of embedding and evidencing the effectiveness of these supports. However, anecdotal feedback presented from individuals highlighted the significant benefits students have received from engaging with the initiatives.

What are the difficulties/barriers?

During the focus groups, staff expressed their concerns relating to the time and capacity required to evaluate the wide range of mental health and wellbeing supports that have been introduced. Feedback indicated that staff feel they are overstretched due to the demand for the services being offered. For some colleges, the size of teams restrict the ability to evidence impact due to these demands.

Concerns were also apparent due to funding associated with roles and the 'short-termism' of this funding, leading to feelings of insecurity in the job roles themselves as well as the sustainability of the supports.

Emerging themes also related to a lack of consistency across colleges (both in terms of structures and approaches), in addition to uncertainty about exactly what/how to evidence the impact of initiatives. College staff felt that they did not know what was required of them, and what they needed to put in place to evidence such impact. The variation in gathering feedback and evidencing impact increases the difficulty of gaining a nationwide picture of the extent to which colleges are meeting the needs of their students. This may also negatively impact colleges' abilities to highlight best practice and inform the practice of others.

Difficulty in reaching students, particularly those learning remotely was highlighted as another potential barrier. Whilst colleges have used a wide variety of methods to do this and to raise awareness of interventions available to the wider student population, ability for all students to engage is an issue. This links back to the perceived lack of clarity in relation to what is expected, it also raises the question: are colleges expected to gather feedback from all students, or just students who have accessed support? Does this include discrete support?

Proposed solutions

Moving forward, participants suggested a wide range of potential solutions to the barriers highlighted previous.

Certainty of funding – Uncertainty relating to funding was highlighted as a barrier to planning and subsequent development of evaluation methods. *Clarity in relation to funding and its duration would help the sector formulate and implement long term plans.*

Capacity – Capacity to meet the student demand has been stretched. With a greater volume of students returning to campus in the Summer of 2022 and beyond, this capacity is likely to be stretched further. Increasing the capacity of the workforce would help colleges to diversify the services offered and meet the needs of the student population.

Evaluation – approaches to evaluation are inconsistent in terms of the ways in which they evidence the impact of support. Some participants recognised the need for context-specific methods and highlighted differing levels of capacity across the colleges. However, participants also acknowledged the value of a consistent evaluation framework. *The development of an evaluation framework would allow for comparison of common principles, and provide a nationwide picture of the impact of the supports that colleges provide to the student population.*

Sharing of effective practice – information obtained via CDN Network and Professional Learning Communities outlined that whilst approaches and structures are different across the sector, there has been a number of opportunities to share practice across a range of different groups and an appetite from participants to do this further. *Further development of these groups with a focus on sharing practice, evaluation methods, structures and so on would help to develop the effectiveness of practice across the sector.*

Upskilling the wider college workforce
– participants also discussed the benefits of embedding mental health and wellbeing within the curriculum and/or providing the wider workforce with a toolkit to support them when interacting with students around the topic of mental health and engaging with students on this topic. This may help to enhance the confidence of the wider workforce in matters relating to mental health, and potentially reduce the number of referrals to the services offered within college.

Next Steps

Following the current data exploration, thoughts and considerations for next steps for this action research project are outlined below.

1. Consider feedback from students

Considering feedback from students will be an important strand of this research. It is acknowledged that students are experiencing increasing demands, and students are currently completing the Thriving Learners Survey. Consequently, the suggested next step is to use the outputs from the Thriving Learners Survey, coupled with the findings from this report and develop a plan which will enable the sector to meet both the current and future needs of the student population studying within Scotland's colleges.

2. Consider wider research

It is important to consider findings and suggestions from wider research in terms of mental health and wellbeing support across the education landscape. Recent research and publications have highlighted the importance of whole-school/whole-college approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing (Gross, 2021; British Psychological Society, 2019; and Association of Colleges, 2017).

Recommendations from the British Psychological Society (2019) also included providing support for staff; listening to students and continuing to engage in quality assurance. This guidance referenced quality assurance in terms of the implementation of formal psychological support within further education. However, it is important to consider quality assurance in all aspects of the wellbeing support provided within further education.

Other research has attempted to gather evidence of the impact of student counselling services at a national level (Broglia et al, 2021). This research recognised inconsistency across further education relating to evaluation measures. Broglia et al (2021) argued that standardised measures would allow for reviewing and reflecting on the data collected. This would also address any gaps in data collection and provide a more comprehensive national overview of the impact of wellbeing interventions.

3. Support the sector in developing effective and timely evaluation methods of interventions

Findings from wider research provides support for consistent, sector-wide evaluation of impact. These themes have appeared throughout the data collected as part of this project. Consequently, a possible next step for this action research may be to support the development of a sector-wide evaluation framework.

Appendix A

Full List of On-campus and Online Supports

On-campus Support	Online Support
Student Counsellor	Togetherall
Student Support Officer/Support Services	Spectrum Life
Student Guidance Co-ordinator/Guidance team	On-line counsellors
Student Association	1:1 support appointment
Clinical nursing support from mental health liaison officer	Wellbeing Advisory Support
Mental health first aiders	Mentoring support
Safeguarding team	Advisors or Education Learning Support
Learning Inclusion team	Pastoral Support Tutors
Student Advice team	Live Chat with Student advisors
Student Association team	Wellbeing workshops
Pastoral Support Tutors	External Organisation information sessions on Zoom
Student Mental Health Ambassadors	Social Media campaigns
Listening Service	Time to Talk on VLE
Library services	Time to Talk helpline
Mentoring support	Listening Time for You
Student wellbeing information hub	Nightline
Mental health promotion workshops	SANE
Personal learning support plan	LT4U listening service
Wellbeing drop ins	Moodle guides written by student advice
Self-help material	Moodle well-being pages
Well-being information (leaflets/books)	Self-help material
The Man Cave	My Day App
Outdoor Mindfulness Space	You're Not Alone Campaign
Free provisions such as: free breakfast and lunch and gym	Report and Support
Walk and Talk Groups	Personal learning support plan
Coffee Mornings	
Sports fitness classes	
Awareness raising events	
The Den (a safe place for students involved in criminal justice)	
Quiet spaces	

Appendix B

Staff survey

College staff with a wellbeing role within their establishment were sent and asked to complete a survey relating to student mental health and wellbeing. The survey aimed to gather examples of:

- Mental health and wellbeing support that students are accessing through their college
- Methods colleges use to evaluate the support
- The most impactful support offered by their college and a reason for selecting this support
- Collaboration/co-creation taking place between colleges and students to support mental health and wellbeing

Summaries of responses to each question are presented below.

Please list the mental health and wellbeing supports that are available for students within the physical environment of your college
Respondents listed 30 on-campus supports which included college staff (e.g. counsellors, student support services and safeguarding teams); campus services (e.g. listening, drop-in and wellbeing services) and events (e.g. coffee mornings and walk and talk sessions). There was variation in supports offered across colleges. However, most respondents referenced the availability of counselling services and other support staff within their establishment. The differences in support offered may be understood by considering context-specific needs of the student population. See Appendix A for the full list of supports referenced.

Please list the mental health and wellbeing supports that are available online for students through your college
Respondents listed 25 online supports which included services such as online counselling (e.g. Togetherall and Spectrum Life); college staff (e.g.

online meetings with student advisors and pastoral support) and apps/websites/phonelines (e.g. Moodle, Time to Talk and My Day app). Similar to the on-campus supports, there was variation across relating to the availability of online supports, most respondents referenced using Togetherall and Spectrum Life as an available online support for students. See Appendix A for the full list of supports referenced.

Please indicate which support is having the most impact on student mental health and wellbeing
Seven respondents indicated that their counselling service was the most impactful. Three respondents referenced college staff such as pastoral care staff, student advisors and student services as having the biggest impact. Three respondents stated that they were unsure, but two referenced the counselling service in terms of having a high demand and being received well.

Please detail why you have selected this support:
For those who chose the counselling service, reasons included increased demand for the service and positive (yet sometimes anecdotal) student feedback. Those who referenced staff within the college stated that this was impactful due to their presence and accessibility for all students.

What methods are currently applied to gather feedback from students to evaluate the support they receive?
The use of surveys was the most commonly referenced approach to gathering feedback from students. Surveys are being used in a variety of ways such as: annually, twice yearly, and at the end of engaging with a support service. Other methods of gathering feedback included: external feedback (data collected from counsellors), focus groups, NUS meetings, class rep meetings, PLSP meetings and student experience committees.

Please provide an example of collaboration/co-creation between your college and students to support student mental health and wellbeing:

- *Collaborating with student unions to run awareness days*
- *Listening Service developed based on feedback from students attending Supported Education classes*
- *Students and student unions have been asked to feed into the newly developed mental health strategy*
- *Started a mental health committee with volunteer students*
- *Students association are members of the College Wellbeing Workflow group, directing all wellbeing support for staff and students*
- *Liaising with student reps to help organise wellbeing sessions and activities*
- *The Positive – Student Mental Health Agreement*

The findings from this survey highlighted the need for a more detailed insight into evidencing impact of supports being provided by colleges. Staff who completed the survey were invited to join a focus group to discuss evidencing the impact of mental health and wellbeing supports. The data collected from this survey informed the design and key themes for the focus group.

Staff Focus Groups

Colleagues with a wellbeing remit were invited to participate in a focus group to discuss themes relating to evidencing impact of support. Seven staff members signed up to one of two focus groups.

The aim of the focus group was to facilitate discussion between college staff on the following topics:

- How well their college evidences impact
- Barriers to gathering evidence of impact
- Overcoming the barriers
- Consistency of evidencing impact across Scottish colleges

How well do you feel your college gathers evidence of impact from students relating to mental health and wellbeing support (please rate this on a scale of 1 (not well at all) to 10 (extremely well)

Most respondents rated their college at a 6 out of 10 in terms of how well they gather evidence of impact. Answers ranged from 4 – 8. Themes coming from the discussion included:

- New services and evaluation processes are being embedded
- Gathering students' views using questionnaires and anecdotal feedback
- Recognising that more can be done
- Difficulty evidencing mental health and wellbeing impact

What do you believe are the main barriers to gathering evidence of impact within your context?

Respondents highlighted a number of barriers to evidencing impact. Themes emerging from the discussion are displayed below:

- Small teams/lack of capacity
- Lack of time/busy college environment
- Reaching all students
- Lack of clarity about what colleges should evidence
- Short-term funding and cuts

How can we overcome these barriers? (possible solutions and next steps for colleges)

Respondents provided suggestions to help overcome barriers to evidence impact. The emerging themes are listed below:

- Increase capacity
- More secure funding
- Embedding mental health into the curriculum

What are your thoughts on the consistency across Scotland's colleges when gathering evidence of impact? (Is it consistent? If there isn't a consistent approach, do you feel that one is needed?)

Respondents reflected on evidencing of impact across Scotland's colleges, the themes from that discussion are listed below:

- Inconsistency across colleges
- Difficult to make comparisons
- Would benefit from framework to guide evaluation

References

Association of Colleges (2017) Supporting Student Mental Health and Wellbeing in Colleges: A Resource Pack

British Psychological Society (2019) Mental health and wellbeing in higher and further education *https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/ files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Call%20to%20 Action%20-%20Mental%20Health%20and%20 Wellbeing%20in%20Higher%20and%20Further%20 Education.pdf* [Accessed 18th April 2022]

Broglia, E., Ryan, G., Williams, C., Fudge, M., Knowles, L., & Turner, A. et al. (2021). Profiling student mental health and counselling effectiveness: lessons from four UK services using complete data and different outcome measures. *British Journal Of Guidance &Amp; Counselling*, 1-19. https://doi.org/10 .1080/03069885.2020.1860191

Gross, J. (2021) Doing more of what works: new evidence provides insight and opportunities for change in how schools support good mental health. https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/doing-more-of- what-works-new-evidence-provides-insight-and- opportunities-for-change-in-how-schools-support- good-mental-health [Accessed 18th April 2022]