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| Student Support Initiative Awards 2017 |
| Complex Case Discussion Group |
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**1) Outline the project or initiative and what makes it innovative and inspiring (max 300 words).**

The concept of the Complex Case Discussion Group was introduced by Allie Scott, Team Leader of the Student Support Team, in February 2017. Over the last few years it has become apparent that we are dealing with a significant increase in students who present with co-morbid difficulties and challenging behaviour. Knowing the benefits of Supervision groups, it was felt the Balint Groups Model, (Balint 1957), could be applied successfully with lecturers, who are working with difficult/complex students and provide space to support them in their work, highlight the legislation and procedures around reasonable adjustments, sharing good practice and promoting a forum for empathic peer support.

The group offers a space to reflect on personal experiences of managing challenging students and conflict and stress this can entail. Where they can look at their personal resonance to reflect on how it may feel for their students who are feeling overwhelmed, disappointed or are in the midst of an illness or deterioration in their mental wellbeing.

In the complex case discussion group, thinking about the similarities and differences between ordinary student experiences and those experiences complicated by mental ill health, challenging behaviour and disability provides a robust framework for academic and support practice.

The use of everyday language in the discussion, alongside the more technical languages of disability and mental health, helps staff to develop their capacity for self-reflective practice and their communication with students. Learning to talk to students about their difficulties and challenging behaviour in a clear and understandable way is an essential skill for any Lecturer, but particularly so for those working with individuals with mental illness and disability.

These skills can also be extended to improve communication with colleagues by encouraging a culture of open discussion, which includes sharing emotional responses in a respectful, circumspect way. This reduces isolation and promotes honest, considered peer support. Improved communication helps reduce the dangers of burnout that can ensue from the emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reliance, which is fundamental in the education setting. Learning about personal limitations, setting explicit boundaries and having realistic expectations of oneself and others, can also increase satisfaction and effectiveness at work.

The group aids thinking about perplexing or frightening situations with colleagues away from the pressurised work environment, fosters sharing emotional responses to accounts of challenging encounters and addresses the range of anxieties that supporting students with mental health and other disabilities can elicit. It enables discussion around and greater acceptance of personal responses to these issues and helps to reduce its stigmatisation.

**2) Detail how the project or initiative was delivered, from the planning stage through to its successful conclusion (max 300 words). Include details of timing\* and funding.**

As an experienced Counsellor, the concept of a Supervision group was one I was extremely familiar with. It was becoming apparent staff wanted to have more discussions around challenging students, whose behaviour was problematic within the classroom environment and what the term “reasonable adjustment” actually meant and where the boundaries lay.

I spoke to some lecturers whom I was currently involved in managing complex situations with and asked if they would be interested in attending the group. The responses were all positive and I set about organising the first meeting.

The first meeting was held on a Thursday afternoon at 4pm. It consisted of a small closed group of invited tutors who I knew had particularly challenging scenarios this year.  The group is very mixed in terms of new lecturers and a couple of extremely experienced ones, so the peer support/sharing element is particularly rich.  Making it a closed group has made it quite intimate and trusting. At the initial meeting we contracted and created the boundaries of regularity, whether it’s an open or closed group & most importantly confidentiality.  It was decided to use real names of students, not pseudonyms, as the lecturers all thought it would be helpful for others to know if there are issues interfering with a students’ learning, the group then had to think carefully about the consent and disclosure of information entrusted in us by the students – and I made it explicit that I won’t disclose anything from counselling if one of my clients comes up.

We took time to define the purpose of the group, this consensus was very important. We agreed that the group members would take it in turns to present a student or situation that they are struggling with, preparing the presentation is a helpful process in itself and we agreed these would be a brief introduction and outline of the case and then the group collaborate about what might be a helpful way to understand the students issues / situation, their behaviour and the wider implications of this on the Lecturer, staff and other students together with constructive ways which may help them.  This takes about 1/2hr and the floor is then open for 20mins for anyone to talk about anything they wish to bring.

The group will be piloted until June 2017, where it will then be evaluated and a focus group will be put together to look at how to role this out to more staff.

**3) Outline the project or initiative’s outcome(s) within the university and beyond with relevant supporting evidence, metrics or testimony where appropriate (max 400 words).**

* Provide a safe space to explore and reflect on students with complex needs
* To educate staff in the legislation and concept of reasonable adjustments
* To create an empathic peer support network amongst lecturing staff.

The main outcome of the Complex Case Discussion Group, was to help staff to be able to safely and appropriately discuss student issues and teaching practice in relation to supporting students who present with, often, co-morbid and extremely challenging behaviour.

Feedback from the participants can be seen below: -

* “This informal and relaxed group is an excellent way to hear about how fellow colleagues deal with students who have complex issues and to relate it to your own experiences…you walk out of each session feeling that little bit less alone and a lot more supported!”
* “I find it a very worthwhile activity. People can openly discuss problems and solutions to difficult or complex situations in their pastoral duties. I find it helps to hear other people’s stories as I can relate it to similar situations I find in my role as a PAT. I find the group would be very beneficial to new staff members as this can prepare them for any difficulties they might face in the future. It is a relaxed and open atmosphere where everyone is free to participate.”
* “The complex case group has been very beneficial as it allows for a high level of professional dialogue to take place across a variety of sectors. This sharing of experiences and strategies to support both students and staff has been extremely beneficial as each individual has best practice to share. I believe that sharing this information in a secure and safe environment is important and allows staff to realise that they are not alone in the challenges that they face and allows an open arena for these to be discussed in a professional and confidential manner.”
* “I have found this Complex Case Discussion Group an ideal way to share experiences I have had with students who require support, thus giving my peers the opportunity to assist myself on the processes and procedures for support. Hearing how my peers have dealt with their own students will stand me in good stead going forward with present and future students.”

The project is still in the pilot phase, but so far it seems to be meeting the objective and aims originally set.