**Student Support Initiative Award 2017-18**

1. Outline of the project

It is acknowledged within the tertiary sector that student mental health is a key issue of concern. Most research and support in this area deals primarily with the traditional cohort of school leavers moving away from home. However, within UHI we recognise that many of our students challenge this norm, including school leavers who choose to live at home and mature learners returning to study. Our very essence means that many of our students are online or remote learners and this presents different challenges to standard face-to-face interaction. It was the gap in provision for these groups that our toolkit aimed to address

The Toolkit was aimed at all staff within UHI, academic and support, including ancillary staff, as any staff member might be encounter a distressed student at any given time. The idea was to provide a simple to use reference guide to enable all staff to develop their confidence when dealing with students with mental health issues. This includes students with declared issues and those who may be experiencing poor mental health but have no medical diagnosis.

The focus was our role as an educational establishment and as such we are not there to replicate the NHS provision or to be experts. For students who are experiencing poor mental health, it is helpful for staff to gain some understanding of how their condition might impact on the student’s ability to participate effectively in their education. It gives pointers towards practical support using, as well as providing staff with access to sources of internal and external support.

The toolkit aims to enhance the experiences of students with mental health conditions as staff increase their knowledge and confidence. This may contribute to student retention and recruitment by showing our commitment to supporting all students with mental health conditions, however and wherever they are studying.

(304 words)

**How it was delivered: planning to conclusion**

During 2016-17 we applied for AMOSSHE funding to develop a digital toolkit to support staff to support students with mental health conditions. We secured £3610 funding. This was used for two main purposes; to pay EDU to develop the toolkit in a way that would be accessible and easy to use for all staff and to contribute towards staff time involved in researching and writing the resources.

Each of the staff involved took the lead on a specific area, meeting in between to share findings and discuss common ground, so that we would end up with a cohesive kit at the end. We also worked closely with Andrew Gibson and Andy Blackall from EDU, who gave us valuable insight into how to convey the information we had in the most appropriate way.

The three areas we divided the writing into were:

* information on frequently disclosed mental health conditions – what they are and what the symptoms can be and wellbeing warning signs e.g. what they are and what the symptoms can be;
* ways to ameliorate the barriers to a positive educational experience;
* support options.

The work was sent in chunks to EDU, who then provided us with initial ‘drafts’ which we could comment on, adjust and tweak until we were satisfied that it was a correct representation of what we were aiming for.

Once completed, it was sent out for comment both internally and externally. This included experienced mental health staff within UHI, and other HE institutions both in Britain and abroad – we had feedback from Bristol University, Federation University Australia as well as a local mental health support group. Comments received were incorporated where appropriate into the final version.

(279 words)

**Impact**

The toolkit was rolled out in November 2017. It was included in the Staff newsletter in November and has been in the Student Services newsletter’, a postcard was produced for internal use to help to direct staff to the resource. It has also been promoted in the Disability Practitioner Group and the Student Support Group within UHI.

At Lews castle College, we have delivered an initial staff development session. Staff are presenting it at the PAT Development Day and Student Services Development Day in May and June and again in the in-service training in the summer.

The URL is available to externals and this was publicised by AMOSSHE in their newsletter. There had been 4289 hits on the website at 22 February, the majority from externals. It is also being offered as a seminar at the AMOSSHE National Conference in July in Liverpool. It was reviewed by ‘Inside Higher Education’ January 2018 and CDN have provided positive feedback and have been actively promoting it through their networks

Staff feedback:

* The session (*on the toolkit*) was really useful. We have all as staff had students who require support in this area and what is sometimes difficult is the complexity of mental health  - it means so many things.
* Inverness College UHI, Claire Kilburn-Young ‘A well-produced piece of work perfectly timed for the climate all of us in tertiary education are facing just now’
* I just wanted to thank you for the VC this morning. It was very informative, and useful to know about the resources. It’s such an important area to be aware of. The video made by the student with Fixers was extremely moving!

External Feedback:

* RCS Scotland, Dr Rachel Drury ‘You and your team have done a fantastic job with this resource – its an excellent source of information and very easy to navigate’
* Dr Dominique Thompson, Director of Buzz Consulting and Former Director, University of Bristol’s Health Service ‘ I think the resource you have created is brilliant’.
* Sandy Maclean at CDN ‘ I thought your recently produced digital toolkit for supporting student mental health was excellent. The emphasis on supporting distance learners was great and so relevant. It’s not something we specifically covered in our CDN digital resource or any others I have so, so you definitely plugged a gap in the market!’
* Edinburgh College, Student Support Team leader ‘..colleagues are very impressed with the content and design of this toolkit..’
* University of Cambridge Disability Resource Centre “I did really like the advice for staff on boundaries and acting within role - always a challenge!! Kirsty Wayland

(429 words)

Lews Castle College UHI