

## **HOW ARE YOU? HOW ARE YOU REALLY? A FOCUS ON STAFF & STUDENT WELLBEING IN THE CONTEXT OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND BEYOND**

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### **Introduction**

This article will cover ways in which the Library and Learning Development Team at Lancaster University have championed staff and student wellbeing. The majority of initiatives discussed have taken place online. Considering the potential of a long-term hybrid approach to work, we are keen to continue to develop online initiatives, taking advantage of in-person events where possible.

### **Keeping Connected**

In November 2020, we launched two events as the starting point for considering wellbeing. Though I had only been with the Library for two months, I hosted this event, facilitating knowledge sharing, and starting the conversation. To the first, we invited our HR Partner to refresh staff on the adopted Five Ways to Wellbeing University approach (see: [www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff-wellbeing/](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff-wellbeing/)). They also covered how to access the Employee Assistance Programme, and other services that the University provided. Our Head of the Counselling and Mental Health then detailed student support and (new) mental health training. For frontline staff especially, knowledge of the student support system is essential, as they can often be the first port of call for students in need.

For the second session, I began by sharing part of my own personal story from the previous months of the pandemic. This was because I felt to ask others to share their experiences and reflect on their wellbeing, it was important for me to be authentic and open. I had a challenging experience, as I had just moved city, and job just weeks before the first lockdown. I am a resilient person, but the multitude of what was happening had been getting to me. I conducted a poll, asking 'how connected do you feel to your team?' The results were mixed; some colleagues were thriving in the new work from home life, others were feeling disconnected and lost. It is important to recognise the different factors and circumstances at play, and ensure wellbeing initiatives are focusing on different specific needs, not just the majority.

The session continues with some words from our Director, who further instilled to importance of looking after your wellbeing. Strong leadership is needed during the most challenging times, and we are grateful we have that here at Lancaster. I then held breakout sessions, during which a group of four to five staff members discussed four key prompt questions:

1. What has kept you connected since March?
2. What has been tried but not worked?
3. What we might do differently, considering our current working arrangements are set to continue?
4. What do you need?

Each group had a leader from the Library Leadership Team or Library Management Team to guide conversation, and a note taker from the Staff Development Group to capture thoughts. The Director was not part of a breakout group, as I wanted staff to feel they could speak freely.

We then came back together as one virtual group, and leads fed back a few key points. It was amazing listening to similarities and differences between groups, but the best part was the honesty. I formulated the discussion and notes into four mind maps.

Feedback from the sessions were excellent “These two sessions have been set up so nicely and in a very welcoming way. They have definitely made me feel even more part of the library.”

The two sessions also facilitated some quick wins, serving as time for an honest catch-up with colleagues - protected time to reflect and work with others outside team. Two individuals were identified as not having regular team meeting, so were immediately pulled in to one. Finally, we got a read on the pulse of the group, with the ability to build on this foundation.

### **Wellbeing Group**

In our Library, the Staff Development Group (SDG) has been running for several years, and feeds in to our Library Management Team. Following longer-term discussions, and the timely November sessions, a Wellbeing Group was formed as a separate strand of SDG (reporting in). The Wellbeing Group has a staff and student focus, is on a voluntary basis, and completes very valued work.

The mind maps created from the earlier sessions were used for initial discussions of the group. The *Serendipity Gap* was identified - responses were mixed, but for a large majority this is an unsurprising loss. So, we focussed on trying to recreate situations for serendipitous moments to occur; so much has been done.

*Coffee Roulette* (all soft beverages welcome) is an online meeting usually arranged at fairly short notice to capture people who had some free time. This was protected time to have a catch up as a group, and then break off into smaller groups with surprise participants.

*Christmas Jukebox* took place online in 2020 – staff were brought together to sing and hear some skilful piano playing. It was, of course, awkward, but unbelievably fun.

*Wellbeing Walks* could be arranged after local restrictions changed and we felt comfortable meeting in outside spaces. The challenge of going uphill and talking was a stark reminder that I needed to get back to the gym – lucky we had another on flatter, accessible ground.

### **Students**

Help yourself before others. I found it interesting, when presenting the Wellbeing work during the Academic Libraries North Conference 2021, how many people were almost shocked that I was saying they could focus on themselves first. Of course students are so important, but you need to ensure your own wellbeing is maintained.

Thinking of student support, we have considered many things including exam period support, frontline staff and student voice.

### Future Plans

When is the 'new normal' normal? Work of our Wellbeing Group has had to be adaptive, started completely online initially, and then slowly moving to in-person through for example Wellbeing Walks.

In the future, we will be reflecting on the mind maps created around one year ago – what is still relevant? Did we achieve all we wanted to? New students will bring new needs, but also new voices. Reflecting back to the Serendipity Gap, I recently attended our *Library Festival*, which acted as the official opening of our £11 million extension, but also a great opportunity to both see colleagues and welcome the community to the building. A student speaker from Lancaster University Students' Union (LUSU) delivered part of the welcome talk, speaking of their care for student wellbeing. During networking, I asked the student if they would be interested in attending a Wellbeing Group meeting, an excellent move in hearing more student voice feed in to our plans. They accepted, and I am looking forward to an open discussion soon. As a Group, we simply plan to do the best we can. The group is low pressure with (potentially) significant reward.

### Recommendations

Does your team have a Wellbeing lead, or Wellbeing Group? Initiatives can start small and informally, and grow into a programme of ideas/events that connect your whole team together. To give a handful of brief takeaways:

1. **Talk to your team:** communicate the good and normalise talking about the bad – have regular check-ins.
2. **Mix it up:** what works for you might not work for others - have empathy and support.
3. **Do not underestimate your input:** you have a wealth of knowledge to share that will influence staff and student life – do not be afraid to speak up.

To close, I would like to say thank you to my colleagues across Lancaster's Library and Learning Development Team. Working with you all is a joy, and I will continue my efforts in the space of staff and student wellbeing knowing we all care deeply about colleague and student lives.