

Supporting staff wellbeing during the pandemic and beyond

Background

Technology has been truly tested, ensuring people have remained connected throughout the Covid-19 lockdown. Most of our sector employees, with work that falls into the ‘non-essential travel’ category, continue to work from home efficiently. Home working presented its own challenges including setting up adequate workspaces and overcoming feelings of isolation. To add to the challenges, staff with children need to juggle work and childcare while schools and nurseries are closed.

In response, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have quickly adapted and built on their existing staff wellbeing resources. [University College London’s](#) impressive one-stop resource, for example, includes a space where staff can share tips on working from home through the ‘padlet’ app¹, while [University of Edinburgh’s](#) page on ‘Looking after your wellbeing during Covid-19’ is beautifully concise with links to university and external resources on wellbeing. [King’s College London’s](#) sport centre has made their online exercise classes free for everyone, and this resulted in some users requesting to ‘un-freeze’ their membership or support in delivering the sessions. On the UCEA ER Network, members in different HEIs have been sharing practices as they update their wellbeing resources.

UCEA set up separate remote calls with members at five other universities to find out more about how they are supporting staff wellbeing during the Covid-19 lockdown. The April discussions lasted around half an hour, with excellent contributions from Edge Hill University, University of Plymouth, University of Law, University of Bradford and University of Cumbria.

As we all continue to deal with a lockdown which began back on 23 March the novelty of connecting virtually is gradually wearing off. We explored ideas on keeping the ‘momentum’ going and thoughts on how support might evolve during and after the pandemic. For brevity, we have organised the five case studies thematically for the time-pressed reader.

The ‘fun’ side of wellbeing

Despite the lockdown, the universities UCEA spoke to found innovative ways to continue connecting with their staff virtually and provide opportunities for staff to access support on other aspects of wellbeing. Examples of the activities across the five HEIs are shown in Table 1 and are broadly organised by the [NHS 5 steps to mental wellbeing](#)².

¹ Edge Hill University also uses the ‘padlet’ app as online space where staff can share tips.

² A set of evidence-based public health messages developed by the [New Economics Foundation](#). See also [‘Five ways to wellbeing at a time of social distancing’](#).

Table 1: Examples of how the five universities embraced the NHS 5 steps to mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic using social media platforms

Connect with other people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bake sale / eating session. <i>University of Law.</i> • Book club. <i>University of Bradford, Edge Hill University.</i> • Choir, e.g. live stream of Gareth Malone's Great British Home Chorus, Cathedrals Group Choir Festival 2020. <i>University of Bradford, University of Cumbria.</i> • Cocktail making and wine tasting sessions. <i>University of Bradford.</i> • Competitions, e.g. bake off, Easter egg painting. <i>University of Bradford.</i> • Coffee / 'fika' sessions. <i>All universities.</i> • Coffee roulette – coffee with random colleagues from a different department. <i>University of Cumbria.</i> • Pub quizzes and charades. <i>All universities.</i> • Fortnightly all staff meetings chaired by the VC and a member of the senior executive team. <i>University of Law.</i> • Regular team meetups to talk about things outside work, e.g. 11 o'clock 'tea'. <i>All universities.</i> • Other staff networks, e.g. carers, menopause, LGBT. <i>All universities.</i>
Be physically active
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free gym classes run by sports centre staff. <i>University of Bradford, University of Cumbria, Edge Hill University.</i> • Living room Olympics – keeping fit videos for grownups and children, produced by sports staff and students. <i>University of Cumbria.</i> • Sharing own dance videos on social media. <i>University of Cumbria, Edge Hill University.</i> • Photo competition – scenery from local walks. <i>University of Bradford.</i>
Learn new skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooking classes and sharing recipes. <i>University of Plymouth.</i> • Lunch and learn, e.g. through LinkedIn Learning. <i>University of Cumbria, Edge Hill University.</i> • Knitting and crocheting. <i>Edge Hill University.</i> • Resilience roundtable sessions. <i>Edge Hill University, University of Cumbria.</i>
Give to others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bibliohubs - bedtime stories read by keyworkers started by an academic. <i>University of Plymouth.</i> • For the Love of Scrubs - Sewing scrubs for NHS staff. <i>University of Cumbria.</i> • Fundraising, e.g. instead of the Edge Hill University Hot Cross Buns annual staff engagement event, a staff member created a JustGiving page to raise money for the local foodbank. • Increased the number of paid volunteer days – two days paid leave plus up to another three days matched for each day of annual leave taken for volunteering. <i>University of Law.</i> • Links to Learning and other home-schooling resources compiled and developed by Education staff and students. <i>Edge Hill University, University of Cumbria, University of Plymouth.</i>
Pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big White Wall – an anonymous online community for staff and students who are anxious or depressed to support each other. The platform includes training videos, self-assessment questionnaires and is moderated by trained professionals. <i>University of Cumbria, Edge Hill University, University of Law, University of Plymouth.</i> • Free yoga meditation classes run by staff or local personal instructor. <i>All universities.</i> • Chasing the Stigma – destigmatising mental health issues, talks by Jake Mills. <i>Edge Hill University.</i>

Note: Many of the activities fall into more than one area.

What appears to be common across all or most of the universities is that:

- There is a broad range of activities and resources to appeal to different staff, with some involving children.
- Participation is voluntary – staff can choose to dip in and out as they wish.
- Regular activities help establish a sense of routine, punctuated with one-off events to help break monotony.
- Not all activities are university led. Many are initiated by staff. Some activities are financially supported or actively promoted by the university, and may be linked to projects in the wider community.
- Universities are generally flexible with the social media platform that staff choose to connect with others.

The serious side of wellbeing

Of course, there is also the serious side of wellbeing, such as ensuring staff have a safe space to work and raising awareness on the types of support available for more serious issues like dealing with bereavement and post-traumatic stress.

The five universities UCEA spoke to updated and communicated their resources on homeworking, adding links to relevant guidance documents, videos and webinars. Staff are reminded of standard homeworking topics such as working safely with display screen equipment, taking breaks and managing remote teams. And aspects of homeworking specific to the Covid-19 lockdown such as working from home with children and looking after the family's mental health.

On setting up a safe space to work, the University of Law went the extra mile to set up a dedicated email address where staff can request specific equipment for work. The requests were normally approved and equipment delivered by the university's supplier within a few working days. While staff could take office equipment to use at home during lockdown, it was not always practical, particularly for staff in London who travel by public transport. Katy from the University of Law said:

"We're going to have a lot more equipment than we actually need at the end of this process. So we've agreed that people can ask to repurchase the equipment from us at a reduced price or use it within our campuses or donate to charitable organisations... We've kept in regular contact with our union and they thought the feedback from their members was that we were very sympathetic and responsive to what they asked for."

Besides Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), the universities periodically highlight other types of support available. University of Cumbria's HR business partners run online drop-in sessions where staff could ask about a range of services from counselling through to financial support. University of Bradford and The University of Law have Mental Health First Aiders, staff members who are trained to discuss about mental health issues with colleagues.

In the first few weeks of lockdown, staff concerns around wellbeing related to anxiety or depression and were typically dealt with informally through the channels discussed in the previous section. Joanne from University of Bradford had not noticed a significant increase in EAP usage since lockdown began. Katy suspected that, ironically, sickness absence during lockdown will be lower than normal at The University of Law and was concerned it might be under-reported.

More serious staff wellbeing issues are expected to surface as the lockdown period continues at different levels and as more people die from Covid-19. Issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse and domestic violence are already headline-makers and are expected to increase. Recognising this, the University of Plymouth recently updated their pages for staff who need confidential support on dealing with addiction, disability or domestic abuse, and included links to local and national support. The confidential pages are grouped together and there is [a large exit button on each confidential page](#) so that staff can quickly leave if they are being overlooked. Edge Hill University is looking at introducing a call back service where staff can speak with a counsellor to talk about more serious wellbeing issues. This would be a less formal intervention than manager-referred counselling or occupational health and more formal than the Big White Wall. The call back service would be run by seasonal counsellors who support the

University's staff and students at the start of semesters (to listen to anxieties about starting Freshers' Week or a new term of lectures).

Keeping momentum

With the novelty of connecting virtually gradually wearing off, how do universities keep staff morale high during extended lockdown?

The consensus is to regularly review and update the wellbeing offering, seeking ideas from staff across the university, and communicating them at appropriate intervals and channels. For example, Michelle at University of Cumbria meets groups of 20 to 30 staff across the university every Thursday to "check in" and find out how staff and their families can be supported through this period of change. The University of Law has a fortnightly all staff call chaired by the Vice-Chancellor and a senior executive to communicate the university's news, answer questions and share ideas. Around 150 staff attend the call and when a staff member speaks, they are encouraged to switch on their camera.

Getting the communications right was challenging at times, not helped by the volume and sometimes contradictory messages in the media. Several members have found keeping all staff messages to weekly at most, unless urgent, helps avoid overwhelming people with too much information. Getting the Communications department to set the tone and promote messages has helped raise the profile of wellbeing as a university-led rather than a HR-led initiative, said Amanda from Edge Hill University. Andy from University of Plymouth found that the university posts on the staff Facebook group are not as popular as staff posts about Netflix movies, and has decided to scale that back and use a different channel to communicate university messages.

Grouping communication goals into phases can help focus the efforts needed to achieve the intended response from staff. At University of Cumbria, communications initially focused on delivering clear and concise information around the start of lockdown. As the lockdown extended, the goal of communications shifted to increasing staff morale, engagement and sense of institutional pride. The new staff intranet on SharePoint includes information on some of the ways the university is contributing to the "Covid-19 effort". There is also [a space where staff can share](#) their stories, pictures or videos on what they are doing and how they are coping in lockdown. Engagement so far is very good, with lots of contributions and positive feedback from staff.

Post pandemic

Additional support for dealing with grief, bereavement and PTSD is likely to extend after the pandemic according to Amanda from Edge Hill University. In preparation to deal with this, her university is working with one of their senior mental health lecturers to create a wellbeing program specifically for their Faculty of Health's staff and students of that faculty. Her university intends to extend the offering to NHS trust staff. It will be more than the normal provision because a lot of staff on the frontline will have seen disturbing events and as a result are suffering from anxieties or might have post-traumatic stress.

When lockdown restrictions are gradually lifted, Amanda believes that introverts will need more support than extroverts returning to their normal workplace:

"We are starting to think how to re-board people back into the workplace. If you think about all the introverts in the world, they are living their best life at the moment because they are communicating through email and not face to face. It's great for them. It's going to open so many situations where some people just are not going to feel comfortable."

Michelle foresees a phased return to work at University of Cumbria when lockdown is lifted, with most vulnerable colleagues returning last. With five regional campuses, her university will need to consider their phased return to work for the different campuses. Joanne from University of Bradford agrees return to work will be phased but is concerned about how to keep morale up when certain teams need to go back first. Mental health support including assessments, occupational health and so on need to be in place to support staff returning to their normal workplace.

Andy from University of Plymouth hopes that the online communities that flourished during lockdown will continue and that people will continue to work in an agile way:

“It has surprised me how easy it has been to move our existing initiatives online. Personally, I’m hoping we can keep the groups and online space and keep using them for something else... I think the biggest thing coming from all of this is that – actually – when we need to be agile, we really can. So, I am hoping we can carry that forward.”

Staff requests for flexible working are likely to increase after lockdown, Katy reflected. Part-time work is common at the University of Law. Many of their tutors left law practice for a better work life balance in academia. Homeworking during lockdown may highlight more types of work that could be done remotely:

“I think people will realise that some roles, we maybe thought before, couldn’t be done from home, actually now have been proven, on the whole, to be able to be done from home.”

But it will be guided by students’ expectations, said Joanne from University of Bradford and Michelle from University of Cumbria. Michelle explained:

“We’ve made it clear from the start that, actually, we require staff to work flexibly just as we [the managers] are trying to work flexibly. And I think that’s probably one of the things that will stick... I do wonder about the students and the services they expect and how they are accessing them in a different way – whether their behaviour will change as a result...so that’s going to be interesting. We’ve got the dimension around staff behaviour and expectations but then actually it is the students leading and determining how we work and operate.”

Joanne from University of Bradford has talked with her colleagues about a celebration with staff and students to raise morale when it is safe to do so. She echoed Michelle’s views and added:

“Now is a really good opportunity to say: ‘How do we shape the workforce for the future? What does it look like? How do we become quite agile? ... I think it’s around balancing the different wants, the service needs and what the future looks like. So, it’s workforce planning, flexible working, your wellbeing offer. We need to consider everything holistically.”

Further information

Based on separate Skype conversations between Hayfa Mohdzaini, UCEA Senior Researcher and five UCEA members between 8 and 21 April 2020:

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Screenshots of the staff wellbeing resources at [University of Cumbria](#), [Edge Hill University](#) and [University of Plymouth](#).

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