

## **University of Lincoln's OfS funded Transitional Mental Health project evolves in response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

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### **Report**

The University of Lincoln (UoL) has acted quickly to adapt its OfS funded mental health project in order to address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes have also been made to current activities so that project delivery can continue during this period. The project focuses on supporting first year undergraduates as they transition from school and college into university. However, with students facing an extended period of remote study and social isolation due to the UK's measures to prevent the spread of the virus, it is likely that all students will go through numerous phases of transition as they adapt to the different pressures of remote working followed by a need to re-adapt quickly to traditional means of learning once they arrive back on campus. The project is therefore making resources available to all students to support their mental health as they transition back from remote study to face-to-face, in effect extending the project's definition of transition.

Until Covid-19, the project involved a great deal of face-to-face outreach work with schools. In light of social distancing measures, this is being replaced by a digital resource pack which will be available as a lesson plan for teachers to use via online learning. The packs include a presentation adapted from the project's transitional outreach workshop, relevant digital resources, points for discussion and activities aimed at supporting both teachers and parents. The project team is also planning a virtual summer school which can be used in place of the traditional summer school. Activities for the WOW (Wellbeing Orientation Welcome) summer school will aim to both alleviate transitional student concerns regarding orientation through campus tours, connect students through virtual activities and replace social activities through quizzes. The resources produced for both schools and the summer school will be useful tools for the project even after face to face-to-face delivery is able to resume.

In addition, the university has worked with project partners Fika to develop a new suite of resources aimed at 'Coping with Remote'. Work carried out with Fika, the project's digital partner, throughout the period of lockdown has identified a number of shared concerns from all students, both transitional and existing. These included a loss of control, intolerance to uncertainty and a need to receive relevant information

quickly. Students also fear a loss of community through the removal or scaling back of welcome events, societies and transitional orientation activities. The project hopes to address some of these issues by making resources available to all students pre-arrival. For example, Fika have introduced a community feed which helps students to both set their intentions for the day ahead and connect with others. Positive feedback has already been gathered on the changes to the Fika app, with some of the comments as follows:

*'it is a useful place... to express worries and post solutions, and for others to read, relate to, and feel as though they aren't alone'*

*'hearing what other students are doing is a really great way to engage new students'*

Student co-production is a key component in the delivery of the project. A high level of student involvement is able to continue through recording podcasts by remote means, with face to face filming being replaced by videos based on graphics and cartoons. A student led project focusing on the challenges of BAME students during transition has also been adapted to be managed and delivered digitally. As things progress, students will continue to be involved on the evaluation of project outputs through virtual focus groups aimed at assessing the effectiveness of new content. Data will also be gathered as part of the continuous monitoring of the Fika app along with metrics from social media for other resources which will measure the reach of interventions.

In acting quickly to address the challenges the current unprecedented situation poses, the project team aims to demonstrate its commitment to meet the needs of students in a pragmatic and timely manner. By assessing what the current needs are and working flexibly to adapt the project outputs and objectives to better support all students, the project demonstrates that it has the capacity to respond effectively to the constantly changing environment students face at times such as this.

### **Further reading**

Bartoli, A., Cock, N, Booker, E. and Kaji, S. (2018). *An evaluation of a peer-led intervention to build resilience and mental well-being in young people*. Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Komer, L. (2020). COVID-19 amongst the Pandemic of Medical Student Mental Health. *International Journal of Medical Students*, 8(1), 56-57.

Rajkumar, R. (2020). COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52,102066.