Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme Case study

As a way of capturing the detail and impact of your Learning & Teaching Enhancement Project, please complete the questions below, which align with the QAA Scotland reporting template. *Please answer all questions in 200 words or fewer.* Case studies may be published on the University's website and elements may be used in reports for QAA Scotland. Project teams may be asked to contribute a Blog or Podcast to help to share project activities and outcomes. Any questions, please contact cad@abdn.ac.uk.

Breaking the silence: Exploring help-seeking behaviours among professionals in training

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Context

This section should provide brief details about the context of the project/activity, highlighting any specific challenges and/or strategies it is intended to address.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**.

This interview study explored the barriers and facilitators to help-seeking for mental health and academic challenges among students enrolled in professional programmes, including Medicine, Law, Health Psychology, Physician Associate Studies, Education, and Dentistry. Previous research indicates that medical students, in particular, often face difficulties in seeking help during their training. Contributing factors include perceived stigma surrounding mental health and concerns about fitness-to-practice implications (e.g. Shahaf-Oren, Madan, & Henderson, 2021).

Our study examined help-seeking through a behavioural lens, applying an established theoretical framework from Health Psychology that is specifically designed to inform behaviour change interventions. This approach addresses a gap in the existing literature, which has largely investigated the issue from an atheoretical standpoint. To enhance inclusivity and the transferability of findings, we also extended the sample beyond medical students to include those from other professional training programmes, enabling us to explore whether similar barriers and facilitators exist across disciplines. Gaining an understanding of these issues will support the development of tailored resources to promote student well-being and provide valuable feedback for strengthening and refining existing support mechanisms.

Description of activity

In this section, you should provide brief and descriptive details of the project/activity. Please include information on student engagement in the project here.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words.**

The study involved 20 semi-structured interviews with students from a range of professional programmes: 13 from Medicine, 3 from Education, 2 from Health Psychology, 1 from Law, and 1 from Dentistry. Data collection for non-medical students was carried out by the funded student intern. Medical students were recruited at a later stage through a separate but related project conducted by a Master's student in Health Psychology, who collected these data as part of their thesis on the same topic.

Data analysis, currently being finalised, applied the Theoretical Domains Framework (Atkins et al., 2017) to identify behavioural factors influencing help-seeking. These included environmental aspects (e.g., accessibility of support services), beliefs about the consequences of seeking help, and social influences (e.g., the role of peers or mentors).

Student engagement was central to the project. The students were trained in qualitative interviewing and the application of the theoretical framework, gaining valuable experience in research design, data collection, and analysis. Their active involvement not only enhanced the quality of the study but also provided them with skills directly transferable to future academic and professional work.

Evaluation and impact

This section should provide an analysis of evaluation and impact of the project.

To support evaluative activity, institutions are encouraged to use the [resources](#) developed by Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Dr Liz Austen, particularly the Enhancement Themes Theory of Change model and the Universal Evaluation Framework (UEF).

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**

This project aims to strengthen collaboration across Schools by fostering dialogue on the consistency and effectiveness of existing support mechanisms. Preliminary findings have already been shared with some Education Leads in participating Schools, providing evidence to inform strategic discussions around student well-being and illustrating how structural, cultural, and behavioural factors influence students' willingness to seek support. We will deliver workshops through internal platforms, including the Learning and Teaching Network and the SMMSN School Higher Education Group, to share our findings across the university. These sessions will raise awareness of the topic and amplify students' perspectives for staff. A report will also be presented to the SMMSN Education Committee to share our findings, as they reflect the perspectives of students from three programmes across the school.

The project will provide a strong foundation for tailoring support services and resources to better meet the needs of students enrolled in professional degree programmes. We will collaborate with Student Support Services to explore how the study's recommendations can be embedded within existing provision. By applying a behavioural framework specifically developed to support interventions, the findings can guide the design of

initiatives that not only promote help-seeking but also refine and enhance existing provision.

Lessons learned and next steps

In this section, you should reflect on the key learning points drawn from this activity for the institution. You might also consider what learning other universities or the tertiary education sector could take from this activity. If there is any planned follow-on activity, please provide brief details here.

Text in this section should not exceed **200 words**

Learning points:

Another student was required to interview medical students to avoid conflicts of interest (the funded intern was a medical student). Recruiting non-medical students was difficult, likely due to exam periods and semester breaks. Delays in ethical approval meant recruitment occurred at a suboptimal time. One interview highlighted concerns about student well-being and the support provided. We flagged this to the relevant Education Lead without breaching confidentiality. This aligned with our aim of highlighting areas for improvement in student support to the appropriate leads.

Next steps:

Preliminary analyses of interview transcripts revealed key barriers and facilitators to help-seeking among professional trainees, including stigma, service accessibility, and peer and staff relationships. Findings will be mapped to strategies such as enabling social support and environmental restructuring to enhance help-seeking.

We will disseminate findings within the University, including pedagogic committees and Student Support services, creating opportunities for cross-institutional learning and refining provision. An academic paper will be produced with student collaborators, acknowledging their contributions and offering insight into publishing.

Findings may also be shared externally, including via the Learning, Teaching & Scholarship network at the University of Glasgow, enabling other universities to draw on this work to better understand factors shaping help-seeking.

References

Please provide links to any relevant websites or further information about the activity in this section.

Atkins, L., Francis, J., Islam, R., O'Connor, D., Patey, A., Ivers, N., Foy, R., Duncan, E. M., Colquhoun, H., Grimshaw, J. M., Lawton, R., & Michie, S. (2017). A guide to using the Theoretical Domains Framework of behaviour change to investigate implementation problems. Implementation Science, 12(1), Article 77. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-017-0605-9

Shahaf-Oren, B., Madan, I., & Henderson, C. (2021). "A lot of medical students, their biggest fear is failing at being seen to be a functional human": Disclosure and help-seeking decisions by medical students with health problems. BMC Medical Education, 21(1), Article 599. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-03032-9