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Bridging the gap: a new approach to student academic support at the University of Exeter

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Abstract

A review carried out during the spring of 2023 identified a need for a new approach to student academic support at the University of Exeter. The model places pastoral mentors within departments to bridge the 'third space' gap between academic and professional services student support. For students who are struggling or starting to struggle, they connect the various strands of support systems that can be overwhelming and become a known friendly and non-judgemental advocate within their department who can make a real difference to their ability to succeed in their studies. Implementing a rapid rollout of these third space roles is not without challenge with quantitative indicators of success some way off and well-documented financial issues resulting in universities having to prioritise scarce resources. However, by sharing the experiences of our pastoral mentors to date, we aim to demonstrate how these third space roles, with the focus, expertise, and capacity to look at the whole student experience, can make a tangible difference to student engagement, progression, and outcomes.

Keywords: third space; student support; wellbeing; belonging.

Introduction

A review carried out during the spring of 2023 identified a need for a new approach to student academic support at the University of Exeter. The review noted a key challenge with the traditional model of student support, which splits responsibilities between teaching and professional services staff, was that this approach often led to issues being treated in silos, not accurately reflecting the students' lived experience. Our solution was to create the pastoral mentor role which exists in the third space between academia and professional services, and also between the student experience and university services. Through working in this third space, our pastoral mentors work with students in departments whilst tracking their access to specialised services so we can be confident they receive the necessary support in a timely manner. Given the complexity of student issues, their presence as advocates and facilitators within both academic and professional settings is crucial, as they connect the various strands of support systems that can appear overwhelming. Their involvement can help students feel more integrated within the university community and valued by the institution.

The review considered our holistic institutional approach to end-to-end student academic support with a view to making recommendations to ensure our approach is proactive, data-informed, makes optimal use of digital tools and resources, and brings together academic and professional services (PS) colleagues to support students in their studies. Its purpose was to fulfil our strategic commitment to support learners from every background to thrive, complement an institutional Mental Health and Wellbeing Review, and address key performance indicators on academic support (e.g. NSS) which had been static in recent years.

Feedback collected at the university during the review highlighted that:

- Academic staff often felt under qualified to support students with increasingly complex pastoral needs.
- There was a lack of consistency in the provision of pastoral support, some tutors providing excellent support, and some minimally engaged.
- Wellbeing and welfare services were dealing with very high caseloads impacted by increasingly complex cases and receiving referrals for non-welfare issues (e.g. accommodation, finance, etc.).

- Emerging student concerns were often not identified and managed at an early stage due to a lack of capacity, meaning issues were often more complex by the time students presented for support.
- Staff highlighted a need for improved use of existing data to identify students who were struggling or disengaging and facilitate proactive reaching out and provision of support.
- Students often could not find the right answer quickly and/or gave up on their query due to the large number of support services with limited capacity.
- Some students, in particular international students, were uncomfortable discussing pastoral issues with staff involved in teaching and marking their work.

Based on this, we established a rapid development pilot to test and refine a new model for student academic support to deliver long-term and sustainable improvement. This model is founded on the establishment of a new role in each department, the pastoral mentor, and brings academic and PS responsibilities together to identify students who are not engaging at an early stage and ensure they have the support they need to thrive in their studies. Our initial pilot phase put pastoral mentors into two small departments, one STEM and one in humanities and social sciences.

A key consideration was whether these pastoral mentor roles should sit within PS or academic teams. We had quickly established that we wanted pastoral mentors embedded within departments rather than as a central service, for which there were multiple rationales. Most critically, we wanted to increase the support available to individual students whilst establishing a culture where they could informally approach a friendly face within their department, who was independent of the delivery and assessment of modules, for advice or support. Students told us that 'referral' to a professional service can be seen as an escalation of an issue and as noted in other studies is often a barrier to access (Cage et al., 2020). The pilot also proved that resolutions to student problems can be both common across departments and bespoke depending on department context. We also wanted academic staff to have a critical friend with an understanding of the discipline context and nuance in their department who they could approach informally for advice on emerging issues or concerns. We also wanted pastoral mentors to play a key role in supporting community within departments and there is evidence that a strong community is critical to a student's sense of belonging and their ability to surface problems at an early stage (Pedler et al., 2022).

Combined, these factors provided a strong rationale for embedding pastoral mentors in departments.

Our model provides all students with access to a pastoral mentor for initial support on the full breadth of pastoral issues that might be impacting their engagement with their studies, while recognising the importance of the academic tutor in guiding them through the academic challenge of their degree, as identified elsewhere in the sector (Grey and Osbourne, 2020). The model also includes our excellent PS team of Education Welfare Advisors trained to support students with more complex pastoral needs and provide guidance to students with significant mental and physical health challenges. These staff are aligned to discipline clusters, or hubs, and are part of our wider Wellbeing and Welfare service.

Our pastoral mentors are staff on academic contracts embedded in departments for the reasons outlined. They focus on supporting academic success and use student engagement data, staff referrals, and student drop-ins/emails to provide high-quality proactive support for students experiencing difficulties impacting their ability to study and be successful on their programme. These data include virtual learning environment engagement, attendance, library use, and engagement with wellbeing services. Pastoral mentors are a key point of contact within academic teams and provide end-to-end support for many student queries and triage issues that are more complex. This includes acting as a third space bridge between the department, professional services, Students' Union, and Students' Guild support services.

Our first pastoral mentors started in October 2023, and we are rapidly developing and rolling out the model so that every department has at least one pastoral mentor in place by September 2025. These colleagues are from within and outside the university and bring extensive student support experience to our institution. Critical to the success of this rapid rollout is the way we are evolving the role and co-creating ways of working with pastoral mentors and colleagues in departments who are leading student support. We are embedding training, supervision, and support for our pastoral mentors through a co-created community of practice. As we evaluate the project, we will consider both quantitative and qualitative indicators of success, including referral and non-continuation

rates, awarding gaps, student satisfaction indicators such as the NSS, and feedback from staff and students.

We are pleased to be able to share the experiences of our pastoral mentors to date.

Our pastoral mentoring experience

At the heart of our mission is the student voice and while we have encountered challenges in these new third space roles, we have had many positive impacts on the student academic journey. With prior experience as third space professionals in similar roles elsewhere, we've relished seeing how the University of Exeter has championed us to support the day-to-day student experience and impact upon success and wellness in the wider student journey. We use a research-led approach to continuous improvement of the student experience within our department as well as institutionally. Our focus is on identifying and engaging otherwise disengaged and disempowered students. Our role is a balance of working with students along their end-to-end journey of support whilst maintaining a strategic focus on research and analysis of engagement, success, and wellness data to identify patterns and blockers for students. The pastoral mentor role, while formally an academic one, is in reality not purely academic nor purely professional services, which initially caused some concern and confusion among some colleagues. In contrast, the students we interact with have found us a supportive bridge into services that they may otherwise not have accessed and a reassuring presence through their academic journey. Once colleagues have seen this, they have been reassured and become vocal advocates for our role.

So, who are we? At our core we are educators, interested in learning as a practice and supporting students to understand and access what they need to feel confident and in control of their studies. We are skilled, experienced professionals who pride ourselves on building strong relationships with staff members across the university, working together to support student success and wellness. We want to empower students, ensuring their time here is meaningful both academically and personally. We are embedded in academic departments, allowing us to develop oversight of the unique challenges and strengths of the cohort to design focused support.

We prioritise proactive and data-informed outreach, identifying at-risk students early and providing support to prevent issues from worsening. Our approach ensures timely intervention to address challenges before they escalate, reaching out to students who have not/would not have reached out for help themselves. The benefits of this approach are twofold – not only do we help students from 'falling through the cracks' but we can also understand how they arrived at this point and listen to them as the experts of their own experience. Our work raises the voice of those less often heard since those not engaged in their learning are less likely to engage in traditional feedback mechanisms.

We regularly review attendance records and VLE engagement data and contact those at risk of disengaging from their studies. Non-attendance often correlates with students who are vulnerable and may be encountering significant challenges. Previously, academic and professional staff lacked the capacity to implement such a process early, resulting in some learners not accessing support until their problems were more acute and often when they had already failed assessments. By March 2024, 68% of our caseload had been identified in this way, with a further 20% identified through their achievement in assessments. We have successfully linked students with a range of specialist support, for example wellbeing, accessibility, finance, and library services. This demonstrates the power of data-driven proactive outreach.

Our learners have grown up in a world full of complex and interdependent issues, which they are required to navigate at ever-increasing speeds, particularly post-pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2023a). Our systems-thinking approach takes into account the intricate complexities of a student's experience as a whole, seeking to understand their challenges in a holistic way and joining the dots between issues where other, more siloed, services may not be structured to do so. Acknowledging the intersectionality of issues on a one-to-one basis, we work with students to untangle what they are going through and co-create action plans, which can help them navigate the path to independent successful learning. We work supportively with students to identify their goals and how to achieve them. By actively listening and mentoring, we support them to identify the triggers, patterns, and contributing factors. We provide information, advice, and guidance to link them in with relevant specialist support and help them engage with university processes. We work with students to reflect on their progress until they feel ready and able to access what they need and navigate this journey independently.

Working with students who may feel 'stuck' or unmotivated, it is important to increase their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and self-actualisation. Motivated by supporting students to have agency and the ability to have an impact on their experience, we aim to build a holistic model of support. With resilience, flexibility, and agility high on World Economic Forum's top skills for the world of work (World Economic Forum, 2023b), we hold space outside of the traditional classroom for working through complex challenges and practising these core skills. For example, we are able to guide students through processes such as deferring assignments, helping them understand complex terminology, and ultimately reducing pressure until they regain a sense of control and capability to finish their work.

We also bridge communication between students and academics where needed, for instance supporting the implementation of learning adjustments from an Individualised Learning Plan (ILP). We act as a reassuring and supportive advocate whilst also working with learners to build up their confidence to be able to do this for themselves in the future. We have also worked in collaboration with academic staff to deliver 'check-in' lectures at times in the term where challenges such as homesickness or social adjustment can become apparent. These informal sessions helped gather valuable feedback and raise our profile, resulting in increased self-referrals and informing our development of a programme of induction activity for September 2024. Often our students put pressure on themselves to achieve the highest grade yet may be struggling to attend taught sessions. Amongst our approaches to re-engage and reassure these students are informal activities such as craft sessions and social events.

We have strongly embedded the idea of 'mattering' within our working practices, which is said to affect student engagement, integration, belonging, and persistence (Tovar, 2013). If something is not working for a student, and there is nowhere to voice this, then they may feel they do not matter and disengage with cohort-level communications or activity. Mattering is individual in nature as perceived by an individual, and therefore needs personalised interventions to boost it (Zawada, 2023). We can help with this because not only are we interested in students as individuals, but we are employed within their department specifically to help them work through their challenges and are not associated with teaching or assessment. We use personalised communications framed around student experience overall, therefore relieving stress about the perception that disclosure to those involved in marking could have an impact on their grades.

Mattering is closely linked to belonging. A lack of belonging can be due to both internal and external factors e.g. imposter syndrome, high expectations on self, cultural and societal norms around going to the university. Many students we see identify belonging and mattering as key to their reengagement. We continue to champion and support a culture of belonging within the department to ensure a welcoming and inclusive community. Simply by offering students a cup of tea when they first come into our office, we let them know they are welcomed as equals. By creating the space, time, and trust for students to feel accepted, recognised, valued, and appreciated by a member of university staff, we have found that a conversation can totally change a student's trajectory and understanding of their journey at university.

We feel very lucky to be working for an institution that is supporting and investing in a co-created approach to student support. Such projects are challenging due to the long timeframes needed for quantitative analysis, difficulties comparing metrics particularly pre- and post-pandemic, and wider sector financial challenges. In reality, much of the early and medium-term feedback on such a project is qualitative or anecdotal, and thus it requires bravery to commit to investment as the 'right' thing to do without upfront evidence of financial and metric-based returns.

Conclusion

We will now roll out the model across the institution whilst developing both our qualitative and quantitative evaluation to examine the effectiveness of our approach. We are also working with others across the sector to share experiences and approaches.

Rolling out a model like this at pace is complex. While there is growing recognition of the need for 'third space' roles which bridge the gap between traditional PS and academic responsibilities, it is not without challenge. The quantitative indicators of success for this model are still some way off and well-documented financial issues facing the sector mean that departments are having to prioritise scarce resources to invest in these roles. Everyone agrees on the need to invest in student support, but agreeing how and where that investment takes place can be difficult. The most significant concern has been that we are simply adding complexity to the system and students will be more confused about where to go for support, alongside the common resistance to change. This has been

addressed through clear ways of working; signposting and establishing very close working relationships between the academic teams, professional services, and our pastoral mentors; and through recognising the importance of clear communication throughout. There are still things to be addressed, not least how colleagues in such third space roles can progress through academic promotion structures, and some specific discipline challenges around how academic roles are defined by professional bodies. However, the most important factor in taking hearts and minds with us has been the experience of our pastoral mentors who have shown through their work and their advocacy that there is a real impact on both student and staff wellbeing. Through our co-creation approach to evolving the model and strong advocacy from those working with pastoral mentors, we are able to overcome many of these barriers.

As simple as it sounds, it boils down to the fact that having a friendly and non-judgemental person within the department who has the focus, expertise, and capacity to look at the whole student experience makes a real difference to students who are struggling or starting to struggle. They see someone empathetic who wants the best for them and who can be an advocate who believes in them, and thus can trust that they belong in a university in which they, and their success, really matters.

Acknowledgements

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