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Exploring the Benefits of Peer to Peer Helping Relationships

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme

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Names of other staff involved: Rosalind Ramage and Maria Donkin.

Title of project: Exploring the Benefits of Peer to Peer Helping Relationships

Type of project: Researching the impact of a new project.

Aims of project

- To develop a Peer Support Programme delivered by students to students
- To ascertain the academic and personal impact on Peer supporters of participation in the programme

Background to project

In 2010/11 the PU Student Counselling Service offered services to 2.49% of PU students (Counselling Service Annual Report). There is little 'recent high quality research into the prevalence of mental disorder' amongst students (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011), but it is likely that large numbers of Plymouth University students experiencing distress did not access counselling.

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that students find it hard to seek help due to perceived stigma associated with counselling (Quinn et al, 2009) and an NUS Scotland report (2009) found that only 17.3% of students surveyed felt able to approach support services for help with mental health problems.

The Peer Support Programme project piloted a student-delivered intervention, as research indicated that students seek support from peers rather than specialist services (Grant, 2002) seeing peers as 'more credible' than traditional adult providers and as providing 'more acceptable' interventions (Pinkney, 2012).

Recognising that student mental health is a complex and serious issue of concern, the Plymouth Peer Support project aimed to offer a systemic, student-delivered intervention to support students in distress and facilitate their transition to wider university and community services if appropriate. Ethical approval was granted from the Faculty of Science and Environment (see Appendix).

Methods used

Plymouth University's peer support programme trained 5 students to offer peer-to-peer support, using a well-established training package from Oxford University, designed by Anne Ford.

The training consisted of 30 hours of training to students in core counselling skills including listening, empathy, questioning, non-verbal communication, self-awareness, assertiveness, cultural awareness, confidentiality, boundaries, responding to crisis and referrals.

After training, the students designed publicity and provided a drop-in facility for students from the School of Biomedical and Healthcare Sciences and the School of Biological Sciences.

The pilot Peer Support programme ran for an academic year after which the Peer Supporters were interviewed to explore their experiences of being a Peer Supporter, and its impact on their academic and personal lives.

Transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke & Rance, 2015). This qualitative data analysis technique is widely used in counselling and psychology research as it enables, the discovery of 'repeated patterns of meaning' (p15, Braun & Clarke, 2006) across the data set.

The transcribed data was coded and the research process involved repeatedly moving back and forth across the interviews. This ensured that themes and analysis remained grounded in the data and reflected the subjective experiences of the students.

Results

Although student take up of the Peer Support Service was low, and the Peer Supporters felt disappointed that they had not been used in a formal sense (e.g. that students did not use their drop-in service or request one to one support sessions) as much as they'd hoped, the Peer Supporters valued the informal 'unmeasurable' aspects of the role. They described this in terms of the personally transforming effects of the training upon their lives and relationships,

'I can't tell you how much the programme has changed my life, It really was a defining moment in my University life and I'm forever glad I did it.'

Peer Supporters reported gaining the following:

- Life skills: such as assertiveness, increased self-confidence, increased self awareness
- Listening and counselling skills
- Enhanced experience of university life and increased affiliation to Plymouth University
- Increased social and interpersonal skills

Despite seeing few students, the Peer Supporters gained satisfaction from initiating what they hoped was to become a permanent service for students,

'I feel like I'm making a bit of a difference, doing what I can, and even if we haven't seen that many people, you know we're sowing the seeds and we're starting something that can in future help hundreds of people hopefully'.

The programme also helped students to feel more engaged with Plymouth University as a community with one Peer Supporter commenting that they felt the training had made them feel,

'rather than like just a face in a crowd, or a number, I feel a little bit more helpful and purposeful, and like I'm probably part of it rather than somebody who's just kind of there'.

The theme of 'purpose' was strong, with one Peer Supporter citing the training as helping her to stay at university. She noted that even though her attendance at lectures had been inconsistent and characterised by apathy, she'd felt 'passionate' about the Peer Support training, citing it as the most significant aspect of her retention at university, saying, 'it did definitely keep me here.'

Most Peer Supporters had some contact with students wanting support and reported how they found this work meaningful for both themselves and the student they supported. One Peer Supporter found that the work increased her sense of being of 'value' to others,

'we can be valuable in, across the range of the scale in terms of how we can help people ... Because I think that after just speaking to him and listening for a few times, the guy that was suicidal, things just began to clarify for him.'

Conclusion

Whilst the Peer Support Programme was under-used, the transformative effects of the training upon the Peer Supporters was perceived as immensely valuable. The research suggests that it

would be advantageous to market future Peer Support programmes to highlight the potential personal benefits of the 30-hour training programme as well as its potential application after training. It is also possible that students may prefer more informal peer support delivered through existing friendship networks and the skills that Peer Supporters acquire may enhance their relationships with others and by implication, the institutional climate of the university.

Keywords: Peer Support, transformation, community

References

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APPENDIX – Ethical Approval confirmation email

From: Paula Simson
Sent: 19 August 2013 16:37
To: Anne Bentley
Cc: Maria Donkin; Rosalind Ramage
Subject: Ethical Approval Application

Dear Anne

Thank you for submitting the ethical approval form and details concerning your project:

'Exploring the benefits of Peer to Peer Helping Relationships'

I am pleased to inform you that this has been approved subject to the following condition:

- Participants are given a copy of the information sheet/consent agreement to take away with them.

Kind regards

Paula

Paula Simson | Secretary to Faculty Human Ethics Committee | Dean's Office | Faculty of Science and Environment |
009 Smeaton | Ext 84503 | email paula.simson@plymouth.ac.uk
Working hours: Monday – Thursday 09.30 – 17.00 Friday 09.30 – 16.30