Wellbeing for Non-Academic University Staff During COVID-19: A Field Note from A Wellbeing Promotor's Perspective

Paula Augustus, MA[1*], Yasuhiro Kotera, PhD[2,3]

[1] University o Derby, United Kingdom
[2] University of Nottingham, United Kingdom
[3] **ORCiD**: 0000-0002-0251-0085
*Corresponding author: Paula Augustus, p.augustus@derby.ac.uk

Abstract: Although the negative impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of the university staff has been reported, the existing literature primarily focused on academic staff. The purpose of this field note is to offer insights about non-academic staff and report how we have responded to the wellbeing challenge. The role of 'Wellbeing Promoter' was established in our university, who encourages employee wellbeing by organising webinars, sharing information and regularly discussing colleagues' wellbeing. Though empirical evidence was not collected, informal feedback from non-academic staff for those attempts was positive, indicating a need for further evaluation. The other universities can benefit from these wellbeing promotive practices that do not require great costs and time yet are effective to protect the staff wellbeing in this stressful time.

Keywords: Non-academic; COVID-19; Wellbeing; Higher Education; Information Sharing; Webinar.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, I (Author PA) was put forward to be the 'Wellbeing Promoter' within the Marketing Team at The University of [Deleted for Peer Review]. Non-academic staff working in higher education have experienced a lot of change, which results in challenging mental health in the workplace such as reduced engagement due to sudden, uninformed changes and increased stress working with new colleagues (van Niekerk & van Gent, 2021). The function of this role is to address the mental health challenges and discuss appropriate support for staff that require help. Some of the common challenges faced include working from home, lone working, and juggling work with issues in the non-work domain such as childcare, personal relationships, family demands (Kotera & Vione, 2020). Indeed, work-life boundary has blurred for many: dining rooms and tables become desks and offices, couches become office chairs, kitchens and bathrooms became shared workspaces (Kotera & Winson, 2021). Concentration can then be difficult and the inability to disconnect mentally or unplug from your job once finished for the day can lead to increased stress (e.g., burnout), lower productivity and decrease mental health (Kotera et al., 2021). 'Zoom fatigue', accumulated stress through numerous online meetings, also causes emotional drain (Kotera, 2021). Non-academic staff often require meetings, therefore many members suffer from this type of fatigue as well. Taken together, there are many risk-factors for mental health among non-academic staff during COVID-19.

My Duties as A Wellbeing Promoter

Overall, what I have been doing can be categorised into three domains.

1. Organised self-care webinars

Self-care webinars were offered to enable our team and other teams to be able to recognise and understand the challenges that we may be facing with anxiety, stress, fatigue and burnout (Morgan & McKenzie, 2003). The use of online discussions across different groups and individuals has been reported as effective to enhance a sense of connection among them, leading to better wellbeing (Amzalag & Shapira, 2021). This one-hour short webinar gave staff an opportunity to reflect their own wellbeing, and discuss helpful strategies to maintain a high level of wellbeing.

2. Information Source for Wellbeing

A shared folder to collect information about mental health and wellbeing was created for staff to share helpful wellbeing information. This was created as an easy-to-access folder for all staff to be able to view at any

time, which included helpful tips and documents to read. Information and knowledge about mental health is helpful to the mental health in both academic and non-academic staff (Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018). During COVID-19, there have been many new helpful resources created, and this folder helped to share them efficiently among non-academic staff.

3. Regular wellbeing check-in with colleagues

Weekly check-in meetings for staff in the team, to ensure that any issues could be discussed openly or in confidence offering good team support and to keep morale high (Kotera et al., 2020). Business matters are avoided in this meeting; we focus on our wellbeing in this space.

All the above were well-received by non-academic colleagues. Some comments included that it was important that we had a space to focus on our wellbeing, and that sessions by a mental health expert were helpful. Many felt that in the university, the wellbeing of non-academic staff sometimes can be ignored, however an attempt like this was highly effective and should be continuously conducted in the future.

To help the process and identify actions, I organised a webinar 'Staff Wellbeing Session' with the 2nd author (YK), who is our Programme Lead for Counselling and Psychotherapy and an Accredited Psychotherapist. Within this session, attended by many non-academic staff including the Marketing Team, the issues raised and discussed were: a) self-care, b) isolation, c) blurred boundaries, and d) guilt with asking for help or disclosing our mental distress. These discussions were recorded, and regularly reflected in our team meetings.

The session was well received by fellow colleagues in the team, with positive feedback shared and staff found it informative. The event also prompted good, open conversations around these important subjects. The presentation was shared to colleagues afterwards and anybody that was unable to attend. A file was created on Microsoft Teams for all staff to access this information at any time and also a private chat facility was available to YK for those who wished to discuss anything in private or more detail.

Suggestions for Non-Academic Staff at Other Universities

Although in many academic institutions, non-academic staff's wellbeing may be under-emphasised, this is a highly important topic to be discussed. COVID-19, in a way, gave us an opportunity to explicitly focus on our wellbeing, and this needs to be continued. As the Wellbeing Promotor, all I did were rather straightforward, however they were feasible and cost-effective. The webinars, the wellbeing folder and regular meetings

did not yield direct extra cost nor much time to arrange. Indeed, some institutions have already implemented these strategies, however the importance of this field note is to report them aiming to enhance the awareness of non-academic staff's wellbeing, which is crucial yet under-emphasised.

While this note offers helpful insights for non-academic staff, several limitations should be noted. Firstly, this field note reports anecdotal accounts, therefore empirical evidence for our suggestions remains to be appraised. Moreover, because both authors were involved in the interventions, positive bias might have been present. However, our perspective can help inform these interventions, offering the lived experience. These limitations point towards a need for empirical evaluation of our interventions. Research should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions.

This pandemic has forced the adoption of new ways of working. Universities have been and will continue to be asked to create an adaptive, flexible and safe work environment. Insights offered in this field note can help non-academic staff, especially managers in higher education institutions to develop effective wellbeing strategies to offer supportive care for this import.

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