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# Understanding and Reducing Student Stress Within Assessment Practice

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# Welcome!

- This session will ask you to reflect on your assessment practice and consider where/why students might experience stress and anxiety.
- Although some level of stress might be helpful in challenging students to develop and improve, we will ask which elements of assessment could be adapted or improved to remove unnecessary stressors or reduce the extent of student anxiety.
- We will explore strategies for improving student experience of assessment, inviting you to share your experiences and best practice within learning and teaching.

# Background: Mental health in HEIs

The need to support mental health needs of staff and students within HEIs has been highlighted

- Increase in student suicides (Caul, 2016)
- Increased pressure on university well-being services (Thornley, 2017)
- Universities UK state that a #stepchange in mental health is required
- Student minds are developing a mental health charter to promote good practice in mental health and well-being as a university wide priority

# Primary Vs Secondary Prevention

- Primary prevention strategies aim to reduce sources of stress.
- Secondary prevention strategies reduce symptomology once it has arisen.
- Zeitgeist for resilience and mental toughness; such interventions approach student stress by asking students to cope differently.
- We could instead aim to identify and reduce the environmental demands which lead to students experiencing learning and teaching as stressful.
- Primary prevention is aligned to Health & Safety Executive risk assessment; stress management standards (demands, control, support, relationships, role, change)
- NB: This is not about 'blaming academics'. We acknowledge that students interact with the learning environment and that their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour impact on their experience.

# Activity:

If you had to design the most stressful assessment possible for your students, what would you do?

(5 mins)

# Activity feedback

- This activity aimed to illustrate that our practice can impact on the stress our students experience
- The following activities will ask you to reflect on your practice
- Those of you working on a fellowship application for the HEA could consider reviewing stress and well-being within your learning and teaching practice
- Please do share your experiences and best practice.
- If someone makes a suggestions you could use, swap contact details and feedback to each other by e-mail. Testimony is an important part of demonstrating impact within a senior fellow application.

# UKPSF: Reflecting on assessment practice

- A3 Assess and give feedback to learners
- A4 Develop effective learning environments and approaches to student support and guidance
- A5 Engage in continuing professional development in subjects/disciplines and their pedagogy, incorporating research, scholarship and the evaluation of professional practices
- Links to: K2 Appropriate methods for teaching, learning and assessing in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- V3 Use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development



# Timeline activity

- Reflecting on sources of student stress.
- When are your assessments set? And deadlines? Feedback?
- Imagine the white board around the room is a timeline from when you set your assessment, to its deadline.
- In **red** pen initial on the line: When do you get the most e-mails?
- In **green** pen initial on the line: When do you get most requests for tutorials?
- In **blue** pen initial on the line: When during this time students complain or have conflict with other students?
- In **black** pen initial on the line: When do you feel the most stressed?

# Reviewing the timeline activity

- What does this tell us?
- What is happening in your modules when you get a peak in student stress?
- Which elements of your teaching or learning might contribute to patterns of student stress?
- What could we do differently?
- What can't or shouldn't be changed when it comes to learning and teaching practice?

(10mins)

# Sharing experiences of best practice

- Take a selection of the coloured post its and jot down ideas on the following:
  - Reflection on your own practice: What have you tried to reduce student stress? (Pink)
  - Sharing advice: What techniques would you advise others to try? (Green)
  - Signposting: What additional support or resources could/ do you use to support your teaching? (Yellow)
- When you have added your comments to the post its please add them to the timeline

# Strategies for reducing student stress.

- Take time to review other colleagues points on the post-its
- Consider which practices you could try at your institution.
- Keep in touch and let us know what you tried and how well it worked.
- Swap e-mails with each other - you should include testimony of impact as part of your HEA fellowship applications

# Questions?

**Thank you for all your contributions!**

We welcome your comments and feedback

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