

Supporting students during an unsettling time

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PUBLIC health emergencies such as the outbreak of Covid-19 (Coronavirus) are stressful times. We are all strained in some way during this testing time thus no-one would deny students of their right to worry over their academic ambitions. Our university students need to be resilient, but can their research efforts withstand this strain? What will it take for them to 'ride-out' the impact of Covid-19 on their work efforts?

The ability to bounce-back from adverse life events is an important trait for students' well-being and indeed their short and long-term accomplishments and future aspirations (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). Research has shown that when people experience adversity it can help them to become resilient (American Psychological Association, 2020) however what is needed is timely and key support and provision to connect students' needs and expectations.

For most students, deferring is neither an option nor a consideration and following advice from the UK Government about face-to-face interaction, higher education personnel who teach and supervise students' need to reflect on how they undertake these tasks all the while considering the wellbeing and perspective of students.

Students will have differing but also similar levels of need. This article along with similar articles (Kantaris, 2018) provides a descriptive framework of how to support students during these unusual times.

Communication from the academic institution

Communication from an organisation to its 'patrons' is very important, more so during testing times. Effective communication by decision-makers is key for basic functions

including planning, organising (processes) and leading. Universities will be responding to distress reactions from students and will have to listen so that they may support their needs and concerns to help them to feel calm. Students will need to be linked to relevant personnel to address their basic needs and be able to access services to cope with problems. This requires steady information. Universities work at speed and sometimes the result is information overload. In times of uncertainty, students require transparency and plain, up-to-date information to help them make informed decisions and choices. Opportunities for articulation like articulation hubs (Kantaris, 2018) could be beneficial. Staff should also be made aware of problems of individual students and general issues within their cohort.

Support and communication from supervisor

The role of the supervisor has never been more important than when the student is facing adversity. An 'academic partnership' between student and supervisor should be capitalised upon more than ever before to help alleviate stress and worry. Students may already be facing other challenges e.g. financial, psychosocial, and adding academic adversity may be a challenge too much.

The relationship between a student and their supervisor can be fundamental to a research student's success. Helping students to develop alternative plans with regards to recruitment and data collection is key to continuing in their endeavours. Sharing experience of research setbacks is also helpful especially where challenges were overcome. Being positive and creative in your discussion with students and being a 'sounding

board' for their ideas and/or action plans to overcome restrictions and/or challenges is favourable. It is also important to champion, 'cheerlead' and 'encourage' students so that they can try to adopt methods and/or types of analysis outside of their realm of knowledge and 'comfort zone'.

Communication between student and supervisor can be complex and is dependent on a variety of things such as 'style' of supervision, different personalities, and pressures. Using platforms such as WhatsApp and Email, as well as Microsoft Teams can expand the options of communication during testing times for individual and groups of students under your direction. When students feel unsettled, speedy, informative, and steady communication can aid to alleviate anxiety and prevent escalating worry. To be able to 'see' a supervisor, tutor, or lecturer online and engage with them if only for a short period of time does settle students. In this way, non-verbal communication can be 'seen' so positive energy from the academic is very important.

'Owning' Plan B

Much of the focus across universities has been to engage undergraduate and post-graduate students through online platforms but it is very different for 'pure' research students who may need to find novel or different ways to collect data in the immediate future. With guidance, students should problem-solve with rigour and develop strategies for the challenges they now face in their research.

Covid-19 lockdown and national/regional restrictions has impacted psychological research at all levels especially in terms of data collection. Researchers and their supervisors are challenged to create solutions to these problems. We need to be proactive but at the same time the quality of research needs to be preserved. Actual (not perceived) control of a situation is key to resilience (Moore, 2020). During unsettling times, situations are likely to make students feel powerless due to their lack of

control. They are however not helpless to finding the solution(s). The Plan B could be to undertake data analysis of secondary data, reducing the scale and/or scope of their work and/or undertaking a different research assignment. More measures could include alternative recruitment strategies and data collection methods or the choice of a systematic review instead of a traditional research dissertation. Students may find that they become more absorbed in writing the 'wordy' parts of their dissertation or systematic review as they will have the opportunity to spend more time engaging with their topic and more discussion may emerge with their supervisors about the impact of their research and future efforts and goals.

Academics need to ensure that students of Psychology obtain a good quality experience of research (empirical or not) and if Plan B is ethically sound, the academic institution will understand. Plans put in place due to unforeseen circumstances should meet quality standards in education with respect to British Psychological Society (BPS) accreditation.

Looking after mental health

Positive mental health is key to resilience (Srivastava, 2011) and indeed this dimension is emphasised in the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2015) definition of health. However, the mental health of our university students is in decline with problems of anxiety being the uppermost challenge faced by our 18 plus student population (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). For this reason, measures to help reduce academic concern during testing times should be a priority to stop the manifestation of further problems. Connecting with peers and social support networks is valuable during these times so that problems can be shared. It is important to adapt communication to suit needs and reduce any distress. Students should speak to their tutor and/or supervisor for assistance and support.

Academic institutions understand that due to challenging situations mental health can be affected and students may fail to

complete work to deadline and/or produce work below usual par. Educational establishments empathise and students can apply for mitigating and/or extenuating circumstances for their exams and/or coursework. In this way, students will feel supported and granted back their 'power' back to complete work of which they can be proud.

All students are worthy and capable of overcoming challenges to become resilient. They do require sound and sometimes individual counsel from relevant parties so that they may turn unsettling situations into academic success.

Managing expectations

Students new to university e.g. transferring from college level education to university, will have the expectation of theatre-style teaching and indeed students returning to university will also have this expectation. Research students will no longer be meeting with their tutors and supervisors' face-to-face. The online learning platform is now the norm across the UK. This also means no mingling and/or getting to know peers. Peer group relations will suffer and the support that was and could be there impacted. Enhancing the level of engagement with students in general e.g. regular online tutor community, student mentors, communication from student unions, could mitigate this impact to an extent and help overcome the overwhelming feelings of students and any lack of confidence.

University life at present is more informal and impersonal than before. The integration of life into university in general for new students is now limited and inductions

are done online. Supportive academics and sound communication from the establishment is needed to alleviate negative impact on individual students and cohorts of students.

Independence of students at university and their moulding of their own life and study is a student and academic expectation. However, now this independence may be the nemesis of the student. Whilst universities and individual supervisors are willing and able to help and support students, students should and need to take responsibility for their own learning and time management. New and older students need to take responsibility for keeping themselves motivated and on-track.

All being well, this article will be of interest to academics involved in teaching students and the students themselves amid our current climate. As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact universities and the way they interact with students, this paper highlights some insights and prescriptions for dealing with ongoing teaching issues. Faculty and staff indeed have a difficult task in the complex planning of supporting and teaching students. This article provides some suggestions to overcome and 'deal with' issues. In addition, please see the BPS website for a Hub of ideas (www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources) on how to mitigate challenges posed by Covid-19.

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