Addressing Struggle and Stigma?
Mind's Proactive Approach to Mental Wellbeing at LSE

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Research Question

As a part of the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework at LSE launched in February 2020, the Mind Mentally Healthy Universities pilot programme potentially signifies a proactive turn to mental wellbeing at LSE. The research aims to explore two central questions:

- To what extent does the Mind Mentally Healthy Universities initiative at LSE impact students' awareness of mental health issues and the stigma around disclosure?
- How could it better engage wider student groups to achieve its goals?

Background

Mental health at universities is a pressing issue, as the distress among younger people has been increasing in the UK (Lessof et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2017). Meanwhile, however, the persistent public mental health stigma tends to discourage treatment-seeking behaviours by increasing the barriers to disclosure. Such stigmatisation not only disempowers individuals, but also increases the risk of mental health difficulties for the student community as a whole.

The LSESU 2016 Welfare Survey indicated that 31% of students perceived stigma around mental health at LSE, characterised by a 'culture of shame for those who struggle'. When embedded in a competitive, high-achieving environment (LSESU, 2019), mental health and wellbeing at LSE face unique challenges.

When it comes to mental health services, while the counselling service remains the most referenced approach, its effectiveness could be called into question due to several reasons, including the capacity limit and restrained accessibility (Brown 2018), variations in outcomes (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), and disproportional target at students with diagnosable problems. The proactive approach, on the other hand, is characterised by reaching out to students with varying levels of mental wellbeing, while "demystifying support and removing the remedial sense" (Williams et.al, 2015: 71). The Mind Mentally Healthy Universities pilot programme may represent such an attempt, by running student-facing wellbeing workshops throughout the Lent Term, under the goal of raising awareness around mental health. The research aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme in achieving its goal, as well as to explore the ways forward.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the provision, reception and impact of the Mind Mentally Healthy Universities Initiative. Prior to data collection, the researcher spoke to the Head of Student Wellbeing and the project coordinator from Mind for a more comprehensive context. The researcher also attended a variety of Mind's workshops which informed the interviews (with no direct data collection during it). The research consists of in-depth interviews with Mind personnel, and interviews with 3 student participants of the workshops. The research is supplemented by analysis of Mind's promotion materials and online course content. It is worth noting that no in-person workshop has been run since the disruption of Covid-19 in mid-March. The research mostly concerns the planned in-person events in the first eight weeks of Lent Term.

Key Findings

Positive impact on mental health awareness and disclosure
- Most participants appreciated the workshops for creating a safe and occasionally intimate space to talk about wellbeing issues, as well as for providing emotional reassurance by communicating that "you're not the only one struggling", "it is ok to be not ok".
- Furthermore, students who consistently attended the workshops particularly appreciated the bonds among the participants/ between the participants and the project coordinator.

Overall, students demonstrate a high level of awareness of mental health and share a generally positive view of it.

Yet to a limited extent…
- In terms of student engagement, the workshops had a much lower turn-up than expected. This indicates a lack of wider student reach, which might be explained by:
  - High time commitment required: students are likely to be practically and psychologically turned away by the high level of time commitment required by the workshops (single workshop duration at 2 hours minimum; one module expected consistent turn-ups during a four-week time).
  - Unclear communication narratives: whereas promotion through various channels (newsletters, posters, leaflets) did seem to provide a general picture of the workshops, communication may not be optimally effective as it lacks a) a clear narrative as to how Mind's programme is differentiated from other regular services b) a more appealing tone, as it is now mostly communicated through straightforward texts and plain picture.
- Furthermore, while it is not yet the main concern for participants, it is nevertheless indicated that the cultural competence of Mind's course content could be further improved. In particular, some students found that the examples/ cases presented in the workshops might not address BAME, LGBTQ+, or international students equally much as others.

Overall, though originally aiming to raise awareness of mental health school-wide, the impact of Mind's programme remains limited, struggling to reach wider student groups beyond the workshop participants.

Recommendations

Toward a Mentally Healthy Future

- The programme should continue to strive to create a safe and friendly space for knowledge and experience sharing. However, the programme might need to adjust its structure, finding a balance between participant bonding (enabled by consistent attendance of lengthy workshops) and wider reach (facilitated by less time commitment).
- Event promotion: the programme could benefit from better polishing its marketing materials, to address the uniqueness of Mind's approach, as well as to inform students how "it is potentially the best thing to do" under their individual circumstances.
- The programme should further improve its cultural competence by accommodating different student groups, as students may face additional challenges as BAME, international students, etc. Tailoring the content to address them equally could increase the accessibility of the programme to all students (Hughes and Spanner 2019).
- To strengthen the institutional campaigns and reach wider impact, it is recommended that Mind continues with staff mental health champion training, to encourage destigmatisation and awareness-raising. The programme could also collaborate with student activist groups like Freedom of Mind LSE.
- However, it is worth noting that addressing stigma and awareness alone do not guarantee mental wellbeing (Hughes and Spanner 2019). Most effective intervention always has to be underpinned by a cohesive environment and culture, that is supportive, non-judgmental and positive about mental health. This should be an important long-term agenda at LSE.

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