

## The impact of Coronavirus: personal perspectives

In February this year I went on a planned trip to the South of France for a week. What was supposed to be a week of down time turned into a time of slight anxiety. The coronavirus was in its early stages in Europe. The advice was being given that instead of traditional European greetings that people should begin to distance themselves from each other and instead of the more common kiss greetings and that elbows should be used instead. Information was coming through about the importance of hand washing and social distancing was in its infancy. On my return home normal life as we know it had changed radically. I was due to work my usual two days per week as a Practice Trainer supporting students on a Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care. As this involves personal one to one support I was unable to do this face to face as all staff were advised at the time to work from home unless giving lectures or other classroom based sessions.

My role is to support the work based learning element of the course and portfolio development. Throughout that first week I alongside all university lecturers we were advised to work from home. Students were advised that the university was still open but the guidance was clear for students to minimise their activities and only attend lectures and the library. This was early March and classes were still taking place. However within a week everything changed with the announcement from government that we as a nation were not allowed to leave our houses except for essential travel. The university had been prepared for this eventuality and in keeping with government guidelines to enact social distancing all courses have subsequently been transferred to the online environment. There is already an online interface in place with the university, used by staff to support students with their modules. There is regular communication with the students in this existing online environment. At the university we understand that all of our students work in challenging health and social care settings many working on the frontline. Currently any extension requests for written assignments are honoured. These are unprecedented times and flexibility needs to be at the forefront of the universities approach.

On a personal level the only time I leave the house now is to walk the dog. I have not set foot in a supermarket but I am lucky to have three wonderful adult children who are keeping my cupboards well stocked. These are challenging times that will change society, as we knew it. I am sure that I as well as everyone else has lain awake at 4am worrying about the future. I think as we go forward in this pandemic Maslow's hierarchy of needs is good start in ensuring we are physically and mentally prepared for the new way of working and living. If we can ensure that we have our safety and physiological needs met then a period of mental adjustment will follow. To go from working in a busy university and office environment to working alone at home takes time to adjust however the university is very supportive to its staff and students alike. Discussing how the faculty will in the next 3 months support our students in health and social care courses at the university, Dr Joanne Smith is at the forefront and will now discuss the current situation.

Joanne

I like many others had been aware of the unfolding effects of C19 since the New Year, but I think it went from being far away and a bit unreal until March 2020. This was when it became more and more evident that this was going to have a profound effect upon our working practice in HE, everyday life generally and some very specific demands upon the HSC workforce.

For a month leading up to the 'lockdown', there were more and more safeguards being put into place, which were initially about ways of being in the environment until we were no longer able to be in University. The students' welfare was of course paramount and there was much time spent reassuring whilst ensuring compliance, which was challenging at times. Luckily the University offered regular updates, whilst we as a team provided support on the personal circumstances and experiences. The students included those going into health and social care practice and working with the most vulnerable, who were concerned for both those they supported and their own /family wellbeing. As a team we were putting preparations in place with the workplaces for the

students, that included moving services as a 'all hands on deck' approach became evident.

Daily life at the University began to change as staff needed to teach classes and work from home, whilst students were asked to just attend classes and then go home, to continue their studies. It became clear after a time that students were increasingly concerned and leading up to the closure of the University many students began to opt out of class, which did not reflect a lack of dedication, but concern and other personal and employment demands becoming evident. The staff at the University showed great adaptation even at this early point and offering a virtual back up and support to individual students, demonstrating respect for student their choices and continued dedication to them.

I was last at the University the day the schools and colleges closed. The university decided it would be safer if we worked virtually from this point, which just pre-dated the Government lockdown. I felt sad leaving and not really knowing when I would be back again. I knew I would miss my students and colleagues and would need to respond quickly to ensure they had a good experience. I knew that we would all being doing everything to support our students and each other, but we were still working out how.

So here we are 10 days in (at time of writing) working from home. I have always favoured human interaction and see interpersonal skills as critical to work in health and social care; we spend so much time helping the students understand the value of communication to human beings and now we have to change the ways we do this significantly. We continue to meet through various virtual platforms and countless calls have been made and even more countless emails. So this is different but we adapt and we share and we still show each other that we are there and can help. In my role this is really important and the first week was about trying to give out positive messages and solve problems. But the term we have used a lot is an 'unprecedented' situation, has really meant something to me, as I have tried to solve problems which are way out of my area of knowledge, being in the unknown and has been the biggest issue to overcome. I am fortunate

to have positive colleagues and systems around me, which reflect a University based effort.

In terms of supporting the students, whilst they are all in Health and Social Care or related areas, they are a diverse group: For some their role in practice has become highly evident and it will be difficult for them to do little else. So we try to reassure them that we will support them at this distance as we can, that we are there to support them and if their organisations needs them to stop their studies we will be there for them so they can 'pause' and pick up where they left off. For others they might be trying to continue with their studies from home and as we usually meet often and they meet with their peers, meaning this interaction needed to take place through another means and so once more our flexible ideas are stretched and we are creative and trying to be available. Many students have experienced changes in their homes and have their children to support and care for, meaning they are trying to work, but have other demands upon them.

What is now in place is seen to continue with the central ethos of student centeredness and so we address the needs of the students as a priority. The assessments are made to accommodate the student's new situation / We continue to teach through virtual lecturer / forums and discussion boards. We must ensure that students don't miss out on the things they need to know whilst not overloading them at this challenging time. An important part of the work we undertake relates to Widening Participation, which can mean that there are already struggles for some of our students and they are already combining a number of demands. This means some adapt well as they are used to managing many demands and have the skills to do so, but for others the demands of the current situation might be too much. So our job as a team has been conveying messages of reassurance alongside practical help. Pastoral support is an important part of our work, but usually done one-to-one, so now we are faced with giving people reassurance / trying to help our students in different ways / thinking of creative ways of managing their time / using email exchange and calls (video / phone). There is clearly no one size fits all. I would say one thing

which has been highly evident is practical solutions and sharing good practice the tools we have to use are different but the ethos we follow is the same that is reassuring the student know they are important. They have a tough job to do and we want them to know we have got their back.

The adaptability of the staff and the students to the situation is remarkable in a short space of time, but it is not without challenge. The University is a place where students can come and reflect and learn about practice is obviously different than before and we are all trying to manage the best we can. There is a tough job ahead. I spend a lot of time looking at my computer screen and I hope to keep students considering their future at the end of this. This is unprecedented and at such times we draw from resilience, which means that we need to look to the future, hence we want to ensure our students can remain as focused as they may to know that this will be in the past at some time and they are likely to have learnt a lot and pushed themselves through. So we are mindful of this, whilst knowing the importance of being there for our students as much as we can. In the challenges they face the learning might be the one thing, which will continue to motivate them and give them a sense of normality (us too).

In conclusion it is clear that as a team we have pulled together to ensure that the students are being cared for albeit at a distance. The infrastructure is there to enable lecturers to teach for another term taking the university into the summer months. As our work, identity and culture is threatened by the pandemic it is our fervent hope that we can emerge from this crisis better human beings with normalcy restored feeling that we have at the university provided student centred support.