Student wellbeing and online learning: Tips for providers

Due to the current outbreak of the COVID-19 strain of the corona virus many higher education providers have switched to online delivery of all or many of their courses. Some providers have a lot of experience in online teaching while others are new to the experience. The rapid development of new methods to deliver the curriculum can lead to unintentional gaps in online safety for staff and students. The following lists resources and tips to assist providers in the developing and running of online teaching with the focus on student safety and wellbeing.

Online safety

The eSafety commissioner has created a tool kit for secondary schools designed to support schools to create a safer online environment. The tool kit is designed to be adaptable to different school environments and it might be a useful resource for higher education providers as well. It has four elements: Prepare, Engage, Educate and Respond. Resources for each element can be downloaded separately.

- Providers should review their current relevant policies, procedures and codes of conduct to assure that the online environment is included in the scope of these documents. This should include clear online behaviour guidelines
- Ensure that staff are aware of their professional boundaries and able to model good online behaviour
- Providers should have clear reporting and response pathways in place and ensure that all students are aware of how and to whom they can report inappropriate online behaviour
- Teaching staff and those monitoring the online learning forums need to know what to look out for to prevent technologically facilitated sexual harassment, revenge pornography, cyberbullying, grooming, inappropriate content, or online stalking, to name just a few. The e safety commissioner has created a number of resources that explain these and other online behaviours

When considering which apps and social media sites to choose to correspond with students and others, the e safety guide might be a good place to learn about the different media. The e Safety guide introduces commonly used games, apps and social media sites and lets you know how to find the privacy settings, how to change them and where to report inappropriate content.

Wellbeing

Students might feel anxious, isolated or might be witnessing or experiencing abuse or others in stress. Due to the online delivery of the curriculum, social contact with students is reduced and it becomes more difficult to know when a student requires support. The short Hope Matters article by Mays Imad outlines 10 simple strategies for lecturers and teachers of how to assist students to cope with the new situation.

At an institutional level the provision of support contact details is very important. These need to be easy to find and students should be reminded of the availability of support repeatedly. The following list provides some contact details.

- Beyond Blue is providing a corona virus mental wellbeing support service and lots of ideas on how to cope with the changes due to the pandemic
- Healthy relationships help to maintain wellbeing
- The self-isolation and physical distancing during the pandemic can increase the risk of domestic violence. Both the e safety commissioner and 1800Respect provide important information about how to stay safe and what to do if domestic violence occurs
- Even though students are studying online now, they need to know where to seek support at their university or higher education provider
- 1800Respect provides support services, and is continuing to do so during the current pandemic. Their website also contains valuable further information about support for people who have experienced sexual assault, including sexual harassment, and domestic violence
- Reachout.com also provides information about sexual assault, including sexual harassment, and a nation-wide list of support services. Most of these are online or via the telephone
- The e safety commissioner has compiled a list of counselling and support services

The wellbeing of staff is equally important and easily overlooked. The following list of tips and resources can be found on the e Safety commissioner's webpage.

- Set up a phone/communication tree to ensure staff have regular communication with their manager or another staff member

- Recognise that staff may be primary carers for both children and their own parents, which may limit their ability to engage with students online

- Provide clear lines of referral to employee assistance providers, union representatives, wellbeing representatives and external support agencies

- Encourage staff to seek help that supports them to look after their digital wellbeing e.g. Google's Digital Wellbeing website, Beyond Blue's Staff Wellbeing resources

- For more information check out eSafety's Tips for supporting staff wellbeing online.