



Love our ARPS

Notes from the student services & counselling member focus group

28 June 2021

1. What are the key issues for SS & C members arising from the pandemic?

- Managing student mental wellbeing.
- Working from home and still providing a sustainable service with increased numbers of users.
- Return to campus and suitable spaces for work.
- Communications and road map for return to campus.
- Disability services – lectures have been more accessible for students because they have been recorded, we need to embed this going forward. However, one participant, who works for an agency, had seen their work completely stopped during the pandemic, so who had been providing disabled students with support?
- Counselling was a clinical entity and it had to adapt suddenly but coped. Highest levels of staff absence because of work-related stress ever.
- Face-to-face support is difficult because of transmission. People not comfortable with the thought of the commute if a full return occurs, and are worried that these concerns and underlying conditions aren't being reflected in risk assessments.
- International students seem to have been accessing counselling services more than before because remote access meant they avoided the perceived stigma.

2. Has your institution implemented any additional support measures to help you manage the increased pressure stemming from dealing with students attending university in the midst of a pandemic and lockdown?

- No one reported that they got additional support, and many reported that support was taken away, including:
- Universities take a one-size-fits-all approach to disability, which is reflected in their approach to the pandemic.
- Hours had been cut for all staff above a certain grade at one university, despite increased need for the mental health services. As a result, costly locums were employed to meet the need.
- There was denial that staff needed additional support when home working.

3. Have any staff faced pressure to return to campus due to the nature of the role?

- Some reported that they had faced pressure to return with the easing of the first lockdown. There was a failure to consider personal circumstances and consult meaningfully.
- Some were told to return so they could be 'seen' on campus.

4. What has UCU done to support members with these issues, and what more can be done?

- Branches had been very academic-focussed particularly on the issue of return to campus.
- It was expressed that this was the first time the union had reached out to Student Support staff.
- Tough working with the ethical obligations of student support roles and industrial action. And it was noted that PS contract workers couldn't access help from the strike fund.
- One participant highlighted that because they were a contract worker they weren't part of the union recognition agreement.
- The participants didn't know what UCU's position was on 'keeping people safe'.
- It was expressed that if universities are bad at supporting Student Support workers, then that says awful things about how they view students who need support.

5. What are the concerns for SS & C staff about online and hybrid working?

- What can we do to address these concerns?
- Are there positives we can encourage?
- Some participants highlighted that less travel was a real positive.
- They wanted the choice to do hybrid/home/office workings and be able to change that depending on personal circumstances.
- It was noted that there was a need to balance the demands and needs of students with what works for you as an individual.
- Attendance at appointments had improved as a result of the pandemic, but some students can't talk online or by phone, so there has been a need to provide a face-to-face service to support those students.

Participants hoped that this was the start of a conversation and wanted to meet again.