

Pastoral care comprises the range of support services that are provided for students' emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. While most institutions will have specialist services dedicated to the provision of this support, academic staff also have a critical role to play, being best placed to observe behaviour in the learning environment that might indicate that a student is in need of support. The relationship between academic achievement and resilience in dealing with personal issues is well documented, and a student who receives relevant and timely support in dealing with the problems of everyday life is more likely to have the energy and motivation to do well in their studies.

Why is diversity best practice important in your pastoral care?

- = Students will benefit from an approach to pastoral care that recognises their individual circumstances and can meet their individual needs.
- = Factors such as caring responsibilities, disability, gender reassignment and family relationships have the potential to seriously impact upon a student's academic achievement and general wellbeing.
- = Many students develop their political, cultural, social, sexual and spiritual identities while in higher education – and the journey will not always be an easy one.
- = Your reaction to the issues that students present and your ability to understand their experiences are crucial in enabling them to work through their problems effectively.
- = You have a legal responsibility to ensure that students are protected from discrimination and harassment and that reasonable adjustments are made to give disabled students equality of access in all aspects of their studies.

Checklist

Develop active listening skills

Some students may be reluctant to talk about personal issues, to acknowledge that they have problems, or need help to focus on what their issue may be and you will need to use your skills to draw them out so that they can begin to move forward.

Improve your understanding of diversity

The broader your knowledge of the issues that might affect your students, the more chance that they will feel comfortable talking to you and confident that you understand what they are saying. This can be important if they are feeling isolated, which could be more likely among international students, students dealing with mental ill health, or students who feel outside the majority culture at the institution. Your ability to connect with them, rather than being seen as someone else who does not understand, may be critical to their ability to make progress.

Be aware of stereotypes

An understanding of the issues that affect particular groups of students can be useful in helping you to provide appropriate support, but it is important not to assume that every individual in that group will have the same experience.

Cultivate emotional detachment

While it is important to build rapport with your students you also need to avoid becoming too closely involved with their problems to the point where the student passes responsibility for resolving the issue over to you. This can be particularly difficult when the empathy between you is strong (perhaps their experience is similar to one you had, or, conversely, is completely outside your experience and so you have invested significant energy in putting yourself in their shoes).

Know your student support services

Your institution will have a number of services to support students, such as a disability support team, chaplaincy/faith advisers, student finance and welfare advisers. Make sure that you know about the full range of support available and how to access it so that you can point students in the right direction. It may also be useful to learn about student networks and groups.

Consider being a role model

If you belong to a minority group in your institution and are comfortable sharing your experiences you may like to consider becoming a role model. The visible presence of people from minority groups who have succeeded within academia can encourage and provide reassurance for students who are feeling marginalised or isolated.

Your equality and diversity/staff development adviser will be able to help you develop your equality and diversity knowledge.

Further information on various aspects of pastoral care can be found at:

= www.heacademy.ac.uk

This is part of a series of factsheets for academics
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/e-and-d-for-academics-factsheets



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