



COVID

Reflecting on the Legacy of Two Years of Pandemic Trauma on Students - Implications for Library and Learning Resource Services

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Introduction

Early in 2022 the alarming rise in Covid infections across the UK indicated that this debilitating pandemic was far from over and it continues [to adversely impact the education sector](#). The Department for Education's announcement of changes to Covid safety measures in April 2022 left staff struggling to deliver teaching, learning and a high quality student experience. The end to universal free symptomatic and asymptomatic rapid flow testing and constantly changing guidance on Covid etiquette – testing, mask wearing, self-isolation, even recognising extensive new symptoms – did not help the situation.

The School Leaders' Union (NAHT) General Secretary Paul Whiteman commented at the time:

'We have repeatedly warned the government that education is at breaking point. We hear sympathetic words and acknowledgement of the great work our members do but see little actual action to bring relief to the chaos. We need a proper plan for how to live with Covid long-term that is focused on keeping levels low and reducing disruption, rather than just ignoring it.'

CoLRiC's chair Sam Goldsmith raised concerns about the implications for library and learning resource services and invited members to share their thoughts and experiences.

'With the national Covid absence rate at 1 in 10 teaching staff, student groups are often signposted to our centres at short notice when classes are postponed. Colleges are keen to ensure an element of continuity in student education and the library is a student's second home after the classroom, but this disruption can have a detrimental effect on capacity, workload and stress in our library teams.'

In July 2022 Ofsted published its [third briefing](#) in a series assessing the impact of the pandemic on education providers; resilient in the face of continuing challenges. 'Most are adapting to life with Covid and focusing on the effectiveness of their recovery strategies. But the legacy

of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns continues to affect some children and learners' education and development.'

In April Ofsted published its [Education Recovery spring 2022 update](#), citing evidence gathered from routine inspections. Key themes arising from the research indicated that the pandemic continued to hinder students' learning and personal development.

- Many FE students have lower levels of knowledge and skills
- Disruption has adversely affected student behaviour, social skills and attitudes
- Recruitment and retention of staff is a challenge
- Mental health and emotional wellbeing concerns remain high
- Staff Covid-related absence is a key concern.

To explore the role that library and learning resource services staff are playing in supporting the wider Covid agenda, CoLRiC issued a call for feedback on the discussion forum and invited delegates to an online seminar in May 2022.

We asked four questions.

- Have you experienced any rise in student mental health and wellbeing issues?
- Do you have examples of lower levels of knowledge and skills that have impacted on student induction, reading, numeracy or information literacy?
- Have you experienced a deterioration in student behaviour and attitudes that have impacted on the ability to manage library and learning resources services? (Ambivalence to learning and non-attendance in the classroom has been cited as one adverse effect of the lockdown.)
- How are you managing with staff recruitment and retention? Do you think that the pandemic and lockdown have encouraged some staff to reappraise their life and careers, or seek opportunities outside of the FE sector?

All the Colleges that participated in the seminar or provided feedback in any capacity have been anonymised.

Have you experienced any rise in student mental health and wellbeing issues?

This question initiated the most extensive feedback and discussion. The legacy of two years of pandemic trauma has seen a lack of motivation amongst the student body.

Exam stress and coursework submission was a key issue. There have been 'meltdowns and panics over deadlines,' and intense anxiety about exams after two years of isolation. For some students this was the first time they had sat a two-hour exam, and even the prospect of hand-writing a paper was daunting to a cohort brought up in a digital keyboard environment. Obviously, this issue is not necessarily Covid related, but exacerbated by lockdown. There has been an increasing pressure on library and learning resource teams to support students with study skills through the stressful exam period. Support for 'vulnerable learners' with problematic home lives and no access to IT was a particular issue.

Motivation: There has been an increase in students not turning up to classes, and in some cases a reduction in visits to the library, having been confined to the classroom for so long to adhere to social distancing.

Library support: Some libraries have transitioned to offering more mental health and wellbeing support, beyond their traditional remit. The library is increasingly seen as a 'safe place'; a 'safe environment.' One participant noted the wellbeing team was situated in the library, and that there had been a notable increase in student visits to the service; an 'explosion of mental health issues.' Other Colleges noted increased collaboration with professional services teams including careers and welfare and noted that they were exploring more creative ways of using 'sheltered' library spaces to support the wellbeing agenda. One College had developed 'Wellbeing corners', and there had been a notable increase in 1:1 student consultations.

Covid sickness and mental health issues amongst academic and professional staff had also impacted on library workload, with examples of students being signposted to the library as a port of call during times of staff absence. This had led to overcrowding and disruption.

Students have become more willing to share their support needs with staff, articulating their concerns and anxieties over study issues. Some Colleges have evidenced that during lockdown some students reflected on their courses and returned wanting to change subjects.

Covid sickness and lockdown stress amongst staff and students had a major impact on library staff also struggling with their own health and mental wellbeing issues. A vicious cycle of impact, in many respects.

Comment

'We have put in place additional support in case learners are anxious - including using the libraries as a quiet place before exams and having learner services staff on hand to provide support.'

Do you have examples of lower levels of knowledge and skills that have impacted on student induction, reading, numeracy or information literacy?

Some participants noted a decline in critical thinking, independent learning, research skills and print and electronic information resource awareness at a time when many courses and qualifications, T levels for example, require a high level of information retrieval skills. As a result, libraries have been compelled to increase emphasis on induction and information literacy to encourage awareness and utilisation of resources and services. Some libraries were also promoting the benefits of reading to improve mental health and wellbeing.

The key impact of Covid in this area was the requirement to transition to digital resources and services and remote access and to help support students to develop a new set of digital literacy skills. The lockdown had also compelled libraries to develop creative ways of induction and skills training, but also to review collection management and development with the transition from print to electronic. There is increasing evidence that the lack of face-to-face induction and training and the reliance on pre-recorded videos and online delivery were impacting negatively on skills.

Some participants noted that new students were increasingly reliant on tutor support, putting more stress on teaching staff which in turn impacted on library workloads.

Comments

'We've found that students that did not have a face-to-face library induction have lower digital and information literacy skills than those that did.'

'Are you asking if general learner skills are less than pre-Covid? That's not my experience.'

Have you experienced a deterioration in student behaviour and attitudes that have impacted on the ability to manage library and learning resource services?

There has been a notable deterioration in student behaviour; a lack of social skills and maturity and an eagerness to congregate and socialise in large groups after two years of lockdown. Examples include students vaping in libraries, 'juvenile squabbling', swearing and showing disrespect to library staff struggling to encourage adherence to social distancing and mask wearing rules. One participant compared the issues with the stress supermarket staff had to endure during this period. The library staff were 'policing' the library space, with another layer of stress on their traditional roles. Some Colleges were publishing codes of conduct to counter this decline, but it was difficult to manage this in learning resources centres that had cafes co-located in the learning space, for example. The decline in face-to-face College-wide inductions communicating expectations around behaviour and attendance and the reliance on pre-recorded videos and online presentations was lessening the impact of sessions on students. Asking key messages on conduct to be delivered through tutor groups also had less impact. One College noted: *'Students need to be addressed face to face by senior College management to make any difference.'*

Comments

'We are experiencing a significant increase in unproductive behaviours (and some aggression) within our student groups this year.'

'We're finding that our lower 6th students (less so our upper 6th) have a very immature approach to college and the library and study centres. Problems with litter, bad language and even issues with them on public transport.'

'We have a couple of challenging groups that we are having to ask to leave on a regular basis and have had to get our Security to come and remove them regularly.'

'There may have been some issues although I think this is a reaction to the strictness of controls experienced in schools.'

'This year's intake has not had a "normal" school year since they were in year nine. They have lost out on eighteen months of classroom expectations and interactions. No wonder they have forgotten how to behave and interact with other students, and teachers!'

How are you managing with staff recruitment and retention? Do you think that the pandemic and lockdown have encouraged some staff to reappraise their life and careers, or seek opportunities outside of the FE sector?

Major understaffing, staff stress and sickness were key themes during this discussion. Stress and sickness amongst the academic and professional services staff had impacted massively on the workload of library teams, who in turn were stressed and on sick leave. Very often the library was seen as the natural port of call to send large cohorts of students when teaching staff were absent. This in turn placed major stresses on the library, impacting on all the areas articulated in the previous discussions. Colleges, reluctant to send students home when lectures were cancelled, naturally signposted them to the library. The resulting overcrowding and lack of social distancing was placing immense pressure on library staff who were increasingly 'policing' the learning spaces and 'babysitting' the students. It also placed major

demands on access to IT services and PC clusters in the library. There was an inherent tension between wanting to support teaching staff, but also educate them to understand the implications of their actions on the library service.

Staff retention and recruitment have been impacted badly in some library and learning resource services. One participant noted that 'We are getting far fewer applicants;' another that, after furlough, a third of staff did not return to work. Many colleagues used the lockdown to reflect on their work life balance and future careers. There is a trend of colleagues leaving FE library services for alternative sectors, like HE, for example. Remuneration was a key motivation, but it would be helpful to explore this in more detail with the wider membership.

One respondent indicated that, while the library didn't have a retention issue, staff attrition elsewhere in the College was impacting on service delivery.

If you have any thoughts on this article, please email colric@colric.org.uk.

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