



**Supporting Success and Productivity:
Practical Tools for Making Your University
a Great Place to Work**

**AN ENABLING APPROACH TO
SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES**

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The University of Birmingham is one of the largest employers in the economically and socially diverse city of Birmingham. Currently we employ close to 6000 academic, academic-related and support staff, 20% of whom are international appointments.

The Employee Support Programme is part of the Wellbeing Division under Human Resources. The Wellbeing Division is comprised of Occupation Health, Health and Safety and Environment and Sustainability. We therefore represent not only a multi-faceted approach to providing support to our employees to combat issues such as stress, conflict, harassment and bullying and personal issues, but are part of a larger holistic approach to employee wellbeing

Through all of our services we are aware that there may be other options that could be explored on top of the services that we offer. These include physical fitness, further staff development and training, Centre on Interdisciplinary Mental Health, Policies and Procedures linking to Wellbeing and formal committees and networks within the University Management Structure.

The Employee Support Programme has been developed over a ten-year period and utilises expertise from volunteers, experts, consultants, and local organisations. It was designed to address reoccurring needs of our community with a focus on Staff members given the unique environment, which both Academics and Support Staff work within.

The Employee Support programme is based on an Alternative Dispute Resolution approach developed by Dr Martin Stanton, as well as through research and fact finding using the Organisational Stress Measure Survey and University Human Resources Data.

Introduction

The Employee Support Programme is part of a larger Wellbeing Department at the University of Birmingham. The Wellbeing Department encompasses a positive and healthy experience for people who work at the University. Its scope is wide, taking in Health and Safety, the mental and physical health of staff and the provision of a professional and high-quality working environment. This is underpinned by a continuing commitment to the principles of diversity.

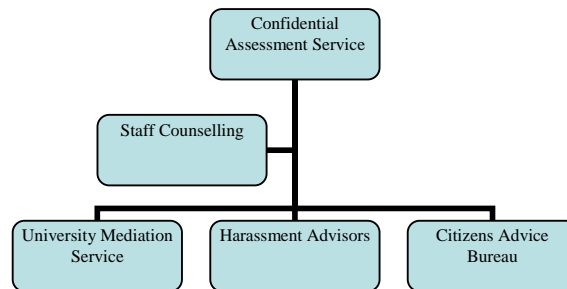
The Employee Support Programme has been designed to be a self-enabling service with multiple entry points that is available to all levels of staff. It has been designed as a user-friendly service with a key aim for employees to find the most applicable resource for their particular situation, rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach. This design complements an Alternative Dispute Resolution approach that allows for needs to be identified before providing a solution.

The Confidential Assessment Service is the first port of call and allows for employees to develop multiple viable options, some of which are part of the Employee Support Programme and others, which may be available through the National Health Service. This is based on the principle that only one-third of all clients who access counselling benefit from this service. Others may need mediation, long-term therapy, medical therapy, or even legal advice.



Our goals are:

- To assist employees in achieving personal and professional wellbeing
- To provide collated statistics on common issues and themes occurring across the entire University (including Student Statistics) in order to inform policy and strategy
- To provide opportunities for conflicts to be addressed at the earliest time possible
- To provide quality services that allows The University of Birmingham to become competitive in the global market for the recruitment of academics¹².
- To clearly highlight workplace wellbeing (with significantly more elements than covered in this case study) as a strategic priority for the University with the aim of becoming an “employer of choice”.



Above is a diagram of the services offered at the University of Birmingham. These include Confidential Assessment, Staff Counselling, University Mediation Service, Harassment Advisors, and the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Services

The Services offered under the Employee Support Programme work within the greater University community, taking advantage of close co-operation between the Staff Development Unit, Occupational Health, Health and Safety, and Human Resources.

The Confidential Assessment Service³ is administered through the programme with the assistance of two registered psychotherapists and counsellors who specifically work at the University in this capacity. The aim of the service is to not only provide an early opportunity for employees to resolve their outstanding issues but also to signpost clients to various options that will assist them to work through the issue. It is meant to be a triage model to assist in finding the best way possible of resolving disputes and other difficulties. On some occasions the service itself may assist with others mental health or workplace issues. Issues will be identified and further referral and signposting will be needed.

¹ Universities UK. Policy Briefing, Talent wars: the international market for academic staff. London, UK, 2007.

² *International Strategy*. University of Birmingham. Accessed July 2007.

< <http://www.inter-strategy.bham.ac.uk/staff/> >

³ Martin Stanton. Confidential Assessment: Redressing the Balance Between Home and Workplace in Psychotherapy and Counselling, Society of Occupational Medicine, London, 2004.

The University Mediation Service is administered by the Employee Support Manager who has a background in Dispute Resolution and is a professional mediator. This service is run as a model in which the Employee Support Manager conducts a preliminary pre-mediation conference that allows for both parties to buy into the completely voluntary process. Once all parties buy in to the process two mediators, who are volunteers from the wider University, conduct the mediation. The mediation panel consists of 10 mediators from various departments and levels of seniority at the University. The Employee Support Manager and Student Complaints Manager also may mediate. This service is combined with the Academic Office (responsible for student affairs). However, mediation is a mandatory stage in the Student Complaints Process.

The Harassment Advisor Service has been running for ten years and consists of 12 volunteers from the University community, similar to the University Mediation Service. Their main role is to signpost, develop options and to listen to staff and students alleging that they are being Harassed or Bullied. There is a formal recruitment and they receive two full days of training per year in addition to Case Work meetings.

The Citizens Advice Bureau⁴ is a nationally run not-for-profit organisation, which provides Advice on a range of issues from housing, to debt management to employment law. It has a high reputation for the independence and quality of its services. The Citizens Advice Bureau is run by a Caseworker, which is provided through a Service Level Agreement with the local Citizens Advice Bureau

We also have access to an external counselling provider. Staff may access the counselling service through the Confidential Assessment Service and are entitled to six free sessions of brief counselling⁵.

Evaluation

The Employee Support Programme collects anonymous statistical data that enables the service to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all levels of employees at the University. We also utilise a client feedback form to allow for ongoing analysis and quality control of all programmes. The Confidential Assessment Service and the Staff Counselling Service both utilise the internationally benchmarked Clinical Outcomes and Risk Evaluation (CORE)⁶. The Confidential Assessment Service also utilises the Workplace Assessment Questionnaire (WAQ) which was pioneered at the University of Birmingham and is based on UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) workplace stress audit categories⁷. Both the CORE and WAQ forms allow for progress to be clinically monitored and assessed.

The data collected allows the service to justify its continuing value, project future demand and funding. In the future it will also be utilised with the Employee Satisfaction Survey to evaluate problems and needs within the University to help identify key areas for future interventions.

⁴ *Citizens Advice: the charity for your community*. Citizens Advice Bureau. Accessed July 2007.

< <http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/> >

⁵ *Employee Support*. University of Birmingham. Accessed July 2007. <<http://www.hr.bham.ac.uk/empsupport>>.

⁶ *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, Special Issue. Developing CORE System Benchmarks*. Routledge:

London, 2006. Vol. 6, Issue 1.

⁷ *Management Standards for work-related stress*. Health and Safety Executive. Accessed July 2007.

< <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/> >



Lessons Learned

As the Employee Support Programme has developed over a period of 10 years we have learned a multitude of lessons as we have gone through evaluation and adaptation to meet the needs of our ‘customers’. We have been able to develop a comprehensive and tailored service that can demonstrably prove that a representative proportion of employees, including both men and women, and Academic and Non-Academic members of staff are seen. We are developing a clearer picture of overall campus wellbeing. We have been able to identify synergies between student and employee services and provide integrated Mediation and Harassment services covering both groups.

In creating an Employee Support Programme there is a great deal of administrative work in developing best practice standards, reporting mechanisms, statistical gathering, and in embedding the programmes into University Policy and Procedures. We missed the planning phase in each of our programmes and proceeded directly to implementation. This meant that adequate resources had not been established to fund and run the programmes that had been implemented. Once we had brought together all the programmes there has been a lot of time spent going back to the initial planning phase and re-designing the system for each individual service. This has been time consuming and labour intensive. However, the period of redesign has allowed us to critically analyse the programmes and we have learned that there are severe limitations to counselling.

The University of Birmingham’s Confidential Assessment Service and Citizens Advice Bureau are both flagship programmes in the United Kingdom. Designing, and implementing innovative programmes with no comparable models holds difficulty in systemic issues such as recruitment and procedural design. It is through the process of design in which the Employee Support Programme has become part of an organisational change towards an approach of Wellbeing within all areas of the University including teaching, learning, research and supporting all members of our community. The development of a Wellbeing strategic approach would not have been possible without the experience gained from this and similar interventions.

Conclusion

Our newly developed holistic approach of Workplace Wellbeing has been a great benefit to Employee Support and as the Human Resources Strategy is implemented we are going to see and increasing profile.

Our multi-service approach to support and assisting staff allows for the ability for members of our staff to be enabled to find the best option for them. This assists in recognising that there is a direct link between performance and work-life balance. When either work or life is out of balance support is often needed to find the right balance.

The question still remains how we can further enable our staff to seek support opportunities such as mediation at the earliest point possible given evidence that early intervention has a greater success rate.



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