



Impact Report 2021-22



ROLE & RESPONSIBILITIES

The role descriptor for the Student Mental Health & Wellbeing Coordinator post stated:

This is a non-clinical role which will lead the development and delivery of a positive and proactive mental health and wellbeing strategy for students on behalf of Strathclyde Students' Union (Strath Union) with a focus on our strategic priority of building a resilient student community.

However, the aim was more than merely formulating a policy for Strath Union regarding student wellbeing, but to research current provision and the actual needs of students and suggest areas for improvement: **be self-directed in terms of identifying areas of opportunity for growth and innovation around mental health and wellbeing for students living both on and off campus.**

and initiate new support mechanisms:

Develop a proactive plan for immediate activity focused around wellbeing and mental health in light of the impact of Covid-19 on students.

From 26th April 2021, through the summer, the Wellbeing Coordinator investigated all recent research on student mental health and wellbeing, not just at Strathclyde but also UK-wide. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, there had been prolific and repeated surveys of students on this topic in recent times, with various consistent findings, e.g., research showed that student wellbeing has been deteriorating for the past fifteen years, yet over 40% of students said they would not approach university services for assistance.

Despite the strength of the University of Strathclyde's current provision of support for student wellbeing and mental health, the pandemic has affected everyone, with significant negative effects on some people.

Marie Cooke
Mental Health & Wellbeing Coordinator

& The Listeners' Team



Although universities have undoubtedly tried to accommodate students in the face of restrictions, we found that nearly half of students reported the pandemic has significantly impacted their academic performance. It is important we continue to monitor the feelings and behaviours of students as restrictions are eased and the university experience returns to some normality.

(Student COVID-19 Insights Survey, May 2021)



There is a deeply worrying and rapidly escalating crisis in student mental health. The report tells us that poor mental health is by far and away the biggest reason students would give up their studies and the life-transforming opportunity that higher education offers'. (Student Academic Experience Survey 2021)

RESEARCH & CONSULTATION

Research highlighted a greater need for support for both new and existing students in the 2021/22 academic year, particularly:

- International students: whose contact with families and friends has been restricted, and who may need additional time and support to integrate into the local community
- Mature students: who have been negatively affected by lockdown and home schooling, while taking up their own studies. Or who have been made redundant and are embarking on career changing study
- Post grad students: who often feel isolated, so there is a need to integrate them more into the life of the Union/University and look at their specific wellbeing needs
- 2nd year students: who had little or no real induction/engagement with student life last year, especially PGR students who may have been locked down on campus
- Students coming straight from school: who have had disruption to their learning, restricted social interaction, and little opportunity for work experience.

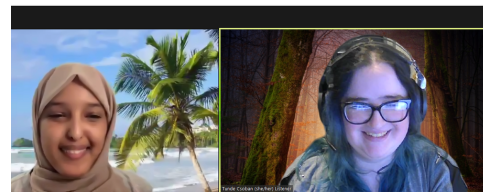
Consultation is essential before considering any new initiative, so the Coordinator used online methods to meet with as many university and union staff and students as possible, to listen and learn from them.

Both students and staff felt that although the university had increased professional counselling support, there was real need for more early intervention/prevention that was informal, immediate, and delivered person-to-person. Based on this, in May 2020, the Coordinator suggested

- The setting up of Hear to Listen as a pastoral support service, led by student volunteers, to offer a person-centred listening service.
- A holistic approach, and solid networking in promotion, to ensure that the support on offer to students is better understood and utilised
- A separation of mental health issues, which should be signposted to professional services – from wellbeing, which can be better served through many other student support initiatives – including academic/personal/ physical/spiritual/social aspects
- Offering students a positive psychology approach to training – e.g., a Science of Happiness course - to develop their self-esteem, resilience and sense of autonomy

'Helping others allows me to give back to the community and have a positive impact on those around me. It also gives me the chance to learn new talents or expand on my previous expertise and knowledge. "Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart," stated Elizabeth Andrew. Volunteering with Hear to Listen provided me with the opportunity to adapt my experience and knowledge to become a listening ear, to meet a lot of interesting people, and get a greater understanding of the world around me. I appreciate being here to listen as a Listener.'

Pia Singh (Listener)



Hear to listen is not only beneficial for those who use the service, but also for the Listeners.

My proudest achievement within my university experience is joining Hear to Listen.

Shauna O'Hare (Listener)

"I joined because Hear To Listen seemed like a great initiative, and I wanted to develop my listening and empathy skills. It's shown me that there are a large number of students that want to offer support to others and make university a more enjoyable place for everyone.

Natalie Frost (Listener)



IMPLEMENTATION

The Principal's address to students in September 2021 showed awareness of the deterioration of student wellbeing and a desire to help people stay happy and healthy during their time at Strathclyde, so that they can thrive and flourish, rather than merely survive:

This augured well for university wide support for the Hear to Listen service that offers friendly, non-judgemental, confidential, 1-1 wellbeing support, in person and online, and a safe space where students can find someone to talk to, offload their worries, or be signposted to additional support if needed. This is not counselling, nor direction, nor intervention, but simply pastoral support, offering accompaniment to anyone who wants it.

There are 4 key elements

1. **The Listeners team:** are student volunteers from diverse backgrounds and years/areas of study, who have chosen to give their time and talents to accompany others. They staff the Caim space, facilitate online support sessions, and form a mobile outreach team to students across the campus, after initial induction and training.
2. **Caim** is Gaelic for sanctuary: a safe welcoming space/atmosphere, symbolised by a Celtic circle, which is appropriate for a safe place in the Union where students can find someone to talk to.
3. **Online (Zoom)** drop-in support sessions from 6-8pm daily: provide contact/ communication/signposting – offered over the holiday periods as well as in term time. Many people find it easier to discuss their concerns online, and this also supports students who are not on campus.
4. **Science of Happiness training:** a positive psychological approach to developing and sustaining wellbeing in self and others. Dr Paul Desan at Yale, suggested offering the Proficiency SoH course to the Listeners not only for their benefit, but also as part of a collaborative academic research study, leading to a publishable paper.

'As we look forward to a new academic year, the University and StrathUnion have worked together to agree a partnership approach to keeping the Strathclyde community safe and secure. As a socially progressive institution, the safety, health, wellbeing and peace of mind of the Strathclyde community is at the heart of everything we do.'

Sir Jim

caim



(*kyem*) *n.*

Sanctuary; an invisible circle of protection, drawn around the body with the hand, to remind one of being safe and loved, even in the darkest times.

[SCOTS GAELIC]



PROGRESS

The University of Strathclyde can be justly proud of the students who have so readily applied to volunteer in order to support their peers. We have had over 160 applications, and our current Listeners' team consists of 125 amazingly gifted, yet very diverse students, from 35 countries, of varied backgrounds and ages, and years and areas of study, yet unified in their approachable, friendly, compassionate personalities.

It is impressive that we continue to receive new applications every week, and that even though the Union was closed for 3 weeks over Christmas, Listeners offered to volunteer, out of concern for international students still on campus, so were active throughout the holiday period, thanks to being warmly welcomed at the Sports Centre and Library, as well as providing online support sessions every day.

Listeners embody the Caim atmosphere, taking a trusted, friendly welcome to everyone they meet – so **they are the project!**

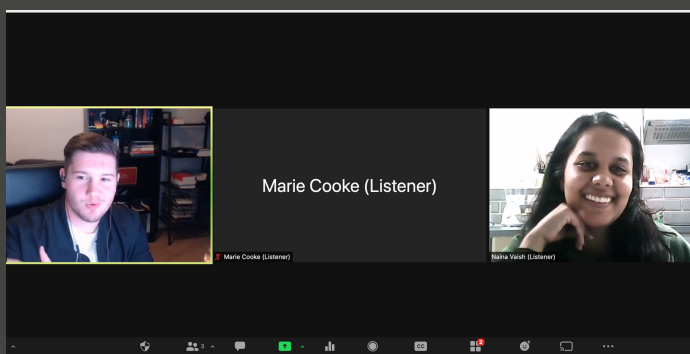
Aristotle, one of the pioneers of happiness, said: "Education of the mind without education of the heart is not an education at all." The Listeners' team demonstrate a common concern for the wellbeing of others, and an appreciation that the university experience should be holistic and happy: intellectually stimulating, personally maturing, and life enhancing, through social interaction and developing transferrable skills.

Apart from the 99 students who have asked for specific support so far, the Listeners have been highly effective in supporting each other, welcoming new members of the team, and listening to the challenges each of them encounter as students.



"I feel that the Hear to Listen project has been a huge benefit to students' mental wellbeing in more ways than one. I know that any students who have come along for a chat, in person or online, have found it to be really helpful and supportive. As a volunteer, I feel that working on the project has benefitted my own mental health and I'm certain that other volunteers feel the same. It's such a friendly and welcoming environment and a great way to connect with other students. The project allows us to take a break from our studies and support each other as well as students who come along for a chat.

Sophie Donnelly (Listener)



CHALLENGES

- **No Caim space in the Teaching and Learning Building**

Although we are currently based on the 1st floor of the Union, in a seating area with use of a small private office for discussions with students, this is only temporary as there is no specific space available in the new Union or T&L building. Staff at the university were trying to find a suitable space for our Caim hub., e.g. the 'incubator offices' directly across from the Union on the ground floor of Graham Hills building would be an ideal location as they are easy to find, adjacent to the Union, and accessible, but apparently these may not be available.

An interesting development of our search for a Caim base has been that an architecture student Listener suggested that Dr Derek Hill might be interested in setting up a "Design a space" for Hear to Listen's Caim hub as an elective with the architecture department. Derek has responded very positively and has suggested not only a 2nd year elective module for the next academic year, but also a Masters project, beginning in January 2022 to design a Caim (sanctuary) space.

- **Promotion of Hear to Listen across the university**

Hear to Listen is unique in Scottish universities, and already Heriot Watt have been in touch to ask if they can copy our project for their students. The partnerships with the psychology and architecture departments of the university, and the academic research collaboration with the New York academics, are developments of the project with substantial long-term benefits, including the possibility of making the Science of Happiness training available for every Strath student in the future, to enhance wellbeing. Yet, there has been no official launch of Hear to Listen, and although the Listeners' team have done an amazing job of promoting the service by their presence around campus and the distribution of business cards, we know that most academics and students at Strathclyde are as yet unaware that this service exists to support students.

Hear to Listen has enabled me to become part of the university community, which I've never felt part of before in my 4 years at Strathclyde. I have met so many people I would otherwise never have come across and it's made my last year of uni so much more enjoyable.

Mhairi Adamson Listener)



"The Hear to Listen team not only provides essential wellbeing support to students using the service, but it has also created a vast and diverse network of student volunteers who listen to and support one another's wellbeing."

Julie Scanlan (Listener)



"To be honest, the first reason I joined this programme was to improve my spoken English. However, I have found all the Listeners are so nice and friendly, and the "caim" is where students can express their concerns or any difficulties without being influenced by a Listener's own point of view"

Lei Qu "(Listener)



"Volunteering at Hear to Listen has been fulfilling and beneficial for my mental well-being as well as being an asset to the whole student community."

Jordan Nelson (Listener)

WELLBEING

According to the Thriving Learners research report published by the Mental Health Foundation in Nov 2021, the largest study into the mental health and wellbeing of students in Scotland, nearly three quarters (74%) of university students surveyed reported having low wellbeing.

Pamela Gillies, Principal of Glasgow Caledonian University and Lead Member for Mental Health at Universities Scotland said:

"We know that universities all over Scotland care about the wellbeing of their students. Currently the path to mental health and wellbeing support for students can be confusing and often the proposed solution is mental health counselling, for which there may be a lengthy wait.

We need sector-wide change, and we are pleased that universities across Scotland are open to our recommendations for continued improvement including incorporating student wellbeing within their measures of success. We'd like to see a broader wellbeing support-model that includes a variety of interventions and services available at every university to empower students with the skills and knowledge to live a healthy and happy life, and feel reassured that more intensive support is available when it's needed."

More than half of university students (57%) reported concealing a mental health problem for fear of stigmatisation, so the report advocates changing the culture of mental health support at university to a broader wellbeing approach for all, which would empower people to be more open, seek and find the right help at an earlier stage, and prevent mental health problems developing or worsening.

Hear to Listen is already delivering this very support

Julie Cameron, Associate Director of Mental Health Foundation in Scotland, said:

'We need to normalise conversations about wellbeing and mental health so that students are comfortable reaching out for help but also that both students and staff understand support doesn't necessarily mean mental health counselling. Our study also revealed students' positive coping mechanisms such as being in green spaces, doing exercise, and connecting with family and friends. So, in many cases a different kind of help, such as an introduction to an extracurricular group with their peers, may be a better option than a formal mental health appointment.'



Going to university can be a very isolating time for many people, especially those who are moving away from friends and family for the first time. I initially joined Hear to Listen because I was very lonely when I started my undergraduate course, and a service like this would have been so helpful to me, but during my PhD I have also noticed many students who were struggling with the same feelings. Joining the team has been an amazing experience - even when you are not helping a student, you still get to feel helpful, feel like you're doing something important by listening to the other volunteers and chipping in with ideas of how to improve and advertise this project. I think Hear to Listen is very close to the hearts of many of us listeners because we collectively continue to shape it into what we can see our peers needing the most.

Tunde Csoban (Listener)



DEVELOPMENT

- A Caim hub needs to be secured as a permanent base for the project
- The P/T Coordinator post must be continued, to support the Listeners' team, and develop Hear to Listen
- Ongoing recruitment, training and supervision of volunteer Listeners is essential
- Listeners will develop and deliver 'Happy Hour' activities to support wellbeing, offering these freely to all students, e.g. informal walks in the afternoons around the routes designed by Strath Sport; occasional online sessions, on topics suggested by students, e.g., time management, study plans, cookery, healthy eating etc.; occasional social/fun sessions in the Union, e.g., dance, exercise, yoga, arts & crafts etc.
- Assemble focus groups regularly over the academic year - with participants from various demographics - to listen to students' concerns about wellbeing issues
- Outreach to international students, and to private student halls, to overcome isolation and build community
- Ongoing promotion throughout year of all that is on offer to support students – not just at Freshers/Induction
- Some quieter events around Freshers for students who feel overwhelmed – e.g. campus orientation walk & talk.
- Liaison with Chaplaincy to foster wider pastoral care – for students and staff
- Staff version of Listeners' team – with staff volunteers available for their colleagues
- Student Support tab on students' class page on MyPlace – giving easy access to all that is available – including Hear to Listen
- Student Support and Wellbeing pages on the university website, and Wellbeing emails to students, to signpost to Hear to Listen.
- Science of Happiness training to be offered to all students

"Being part of Hear to Listen has been an absolute pleasure. I've been able to communicate and exchange ideas with people from different years, courses, and cultures, which has immensely supported my personal growth."

Katrin Djapanova (Listener)



The work done by Hear To Listen is amazing. I think it is just what students need at the moment and makes a welcome, proactive, and refreshing approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Katharine Blanks
Adviser



PARTNERSHIPS

The 'Hear to Listen' service is a terrific addition to the existing supports available to the Strathclyde student community. Its ethos is quite evidently student-centred and aligns very well with that of the person-centred approach we try to foster in our students undertaking the BSc in Psychology and Counselling. Students who have committed to volunteer with the service as part of their final year placement class are able to apply their listening skills knowing that this is the kind of non-directive peer support that can make a difference in the day-to-day lives of fellow students.

The project has been led with care, passion and focus in the service of Strathclyde students.

**Malcolm McMillan, Teaching Associate
School of Psychological Sciences and Health (The Counselling Unit)**

Short term we have Y5 Architecture Masters students who can engage immediately and we can hopefully develop the mutual benefits over the coming months. Longer term (2022/23) we would hope to run a Y2 elective class that would be specifically linked to the design of the 'Caim'. This would be a 10 credit, one semester module and I would hope that we could develop some 'live build' element within this. We see real benefits for our student cohort here and they would have exposure to client/end user as well as design and fabrication process.

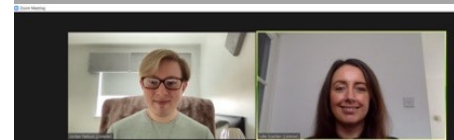
We are excited about both the short and longer term opportunities offered by this collaboration with Hear to Listen, and hope that this can have mutual benefits through the symbiosis already established.

**Derek Hill
Teaching Fellow, Course Director
Department of Architecture**



Hear to Listen is a really innovative way of students supporting students. The diversity and breadth of experience that has been brought together by Marie and the team is such a huge asset to the whole university community.

Lorna Gilkison, Library



I was really surprised by the level of professionalism and care demonstrated by the Listeners' team during the filming. Their passion and knowledge absolutely shone through. Having been someone who had a few tough times at university, I can absolutely see the value and importance of a project such as this one.

**Oliver Dickinson,
(Reporter STV News)**



Strathclyde Sport are delighted to work in tandem with the Listeners from the Hear to Listen Project as they provide a valuable service to their fellow students, providing peer support and promoting holistic student wellbeing.

Seona McKenzie



PARTNERSHIPS

The passion, knowledge and commitment of the Strathclyde Hear to Listen team has been enhanced by their amazing partnership with the U.S. based Pursuit of Happiness team. Together they have provided opportunities for our students to develop listening skills and techniques to reflect on and change their own approach to happiness as well as providing a valuable resource for other Strathclyde students. Evaluation of the initial project should afford opportunities for shaping the tools and experiences for Strathclyde students' specific needs and hopefully mean an ongoing roll-out of a tailored service year on year that will meet the needs of so many Strathclyders post-pandemic."

Dr Steve Kelly, Course Leader,
School of Psychological Sciences and Health

The genius of Hear to Listen is that it is designed to play both a preventive as well as remedial role in dealing with widespread student distress. The benefits of the project are manifold:

1. Many students experiencing emotional turmoil may initially be more inclined to confide in peers than professionals.
2. Because a limited amount of training is needed to cultivate "listeners," the potential staffing available for mobilization is extensive.
3. The listeners do not play the purely passive roles suggested by their titles. The Hear to Listen "wellbeing toolbox" provides a broad array of tools to student clients, beyond the much-celebrated psychological benefit of an empathic ear. These range from referral to emergency services for students at immediate risk, to signposting for professional counseling for students in distress, as well as the provision of resources such as an online course on psychological well-being (The Science of Happiness: Theory and Practice), with time-tested benefits for depression prevention as well as mitigation.
4. And not least, many volunteers involved in the project, who were or are victims of the same silent epidemic, experience significant relief through the very act of volunteering to listen. This is no surprise, as volunteering itself ranks highly in the scientific literature as a factor associated with psychological well-being.

Dr Mark Setton, pursuitofhappiness.org

"I think Hear to listen has been a brilliant addition to the university's wellbeing and support offering. They've been empathetic, reliable and a mainstay in the union. I've stopped by multiple times to say hello, vent and breathe and they have been an invaluable support to students. I hope it stays, and is supported and expanded across the university. We need to champion this".

Nathan Epemolu, BAME Rep



"The listeners have made an incredible impact on student wellbeing - this has been made evident through the students dedication to the project and the noticeable community atmosphere that is now present within the union. Peer support is a provision that is lacking within the University of Strathclyde in comparison to other Scottish universities. This programme addresses this gap allowing for students to seek relevant confidential support that has widely improved student wellbeing."

Katerina Goros
Peer Wellbeing Support
Worker

