Further Education Chaplaincy and the Church

Listening to the needs of staff and students in further education

Nigel Roberts

Contents

Introduction

This paper is based on research undertaken in the first half of 2023 amongst staff and students at several colleges in the Midlands and North of England. The aim of the research was to gain information that would assist the church in its vision to provide chaplaincy services to local institutions and enable them to create offers that were relevant and appropriate. This paper outlines the methodology used, acknowledges the limitations of the approach, analyses the answers given and makes recommendations for the shape of chaplaincy and future research. It is hoped that this will prove a useful tool in discussion of chaplaincy provision to young people post 16.

To our knowledge no other research has been done in this area and with an increasing missional focus on the sector it is important to begin to amass accurate data that can drive the conversation. This brief paper is the start of that process.

Scope and Methodology

 The limited nature of this research is acknowledged. Neither funding nor resources were available to undertake anything more than a base line capture of information from a limited number of institutions. However, the answers given have been detailed and insightful, and as such offer a useful starting point for analysis.

Three surveys were created. One a survey of staff needs, a second of student needs as assessed by staff and a third of student needs as expressed by students themselves. The surveys were constructed along similar lines and asked about issues that were being faced, needs that arose from those issues and what solutions the respondent considered

appropriate to meet those needs. Surveys were sent to 17 colleges and a total 90 completed surveys were received back from 7 colleges (68 from staff and 22 from students). Several other colleges acknowledged the importance of the exercise but were not able to respond due to the pressures they felt staff were under. They remained open to further research in the future.

In addition to the surveys, conversations were scheduled with several staff working in a variety of settings – admissions, student support, teaching, and management. These were open conversations taking the survey questions as a starting point but allowing staff the freedom to explore more widely if they wished to.

Finally, a focus group with students allowed for a more detailed examination of the questions posed in the survey and offered the opportunity for students to comment on answers provided by staff and student respondents alike.

All the above created a great deal of data. The level of detail varied. Most of the staff responses were in depth, often filling half a page in response to each question. Student responses, by contrast, were thin. Often one sentence/one-line answers. The focus group was therefore an important means of expanding understanding of student need and allowing commentary, on what the staff of colleges felt the needs of students were, which in the majority of answers proved accurate.

The answers as presented here stand alone. There has been no correlation with more general research about the needs of young people post the Covid pandemic or about the issues and attitudes held by this generation. Further research could undertake such a review along with more wide-ranging surveys across the sector.

Neither did this research undertake any quantitative research. We did not look at numbers of students accessing counselling or numbers of days lost due to illness etc. Again, such a level of detail was out with the scope of this research.

But even taking account of these limitations the answers provided are still valuable. The response of many staff was one of gratitude, that someone was bothered enough to ask the question. That is itself an interesting comment.

Listening to Staff

Staff Issues

This section outlines the survey answers and supplements the data with commentary from the interviews. Not surprisingly a lot of the answers reflected the mood of the general populus in the wider community and by far the biggest percentage of answers related to cost-of-living issues or staff mental health problems. The third most significant issue related to time – not enough time, to do everything that was now expected – administration, teaching, pastoral care. There was clearly far less time available for staff to be with students. This latter issue was seen as particularly problematic as student needs were considered very great at this time and yet there were fewer staff available to deal with them. The range of answers is shown in the figure 1 below. The percentage figures relate to the percentage of respondents highlighting that particular issue.

Staff Issues
(% of respondents mentioning each issue)

- ■ Cost of Living Issues (many staff using food banks)
- ■ Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing
- ■ Lack of Time for Students
- ■ Behaviour and Other Issues
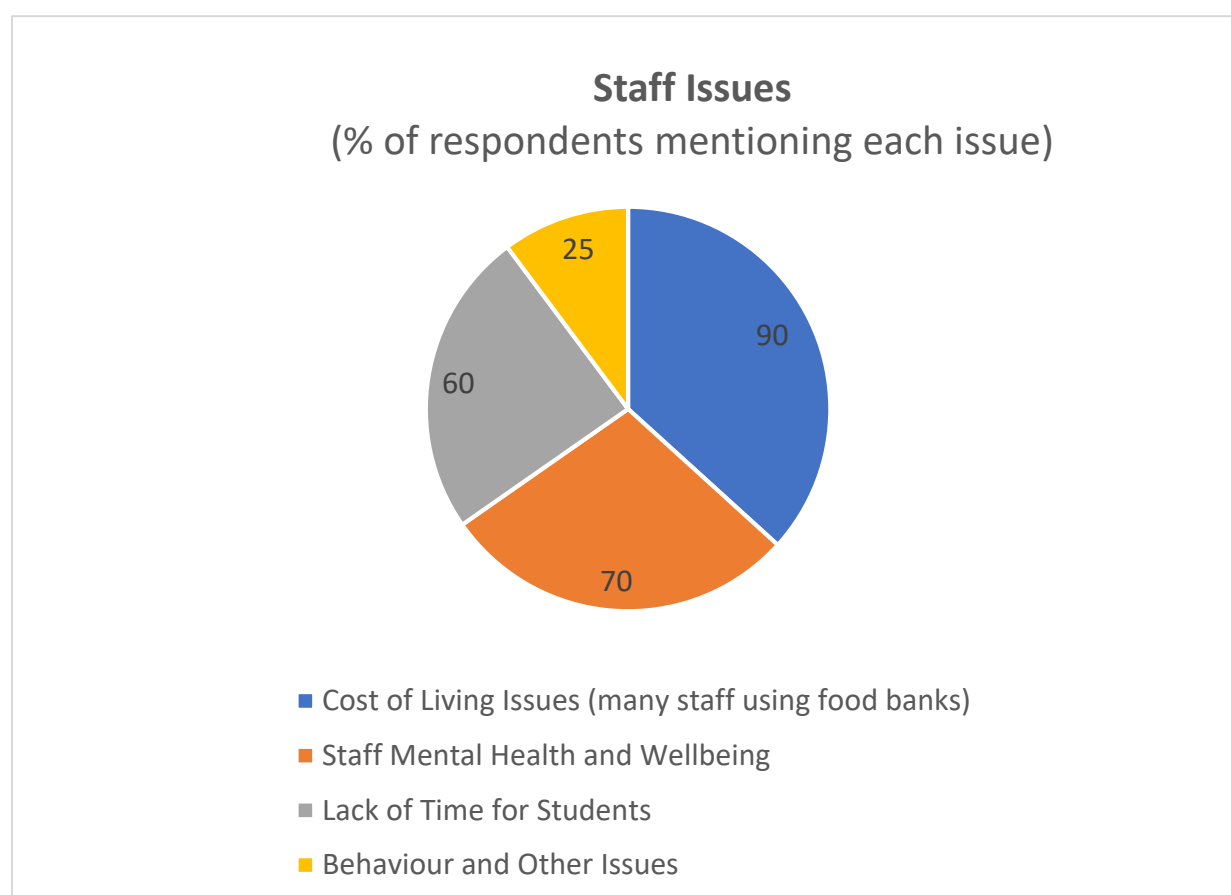
Cost of living – several points were made in relation to this. Many support and administrative staff are using food banks regularly and some are finding cost of travel prohibitive and therefore not able to come into work. The perceived low salaries and lack of incremental increases in the current crisis has led to many seeking jobs elsewhere and linked with this, colleges are finding recruitment difficult. It was interesting to hear staff say that they felt working in a supermarket was a better option for them and their families with things the way they are.
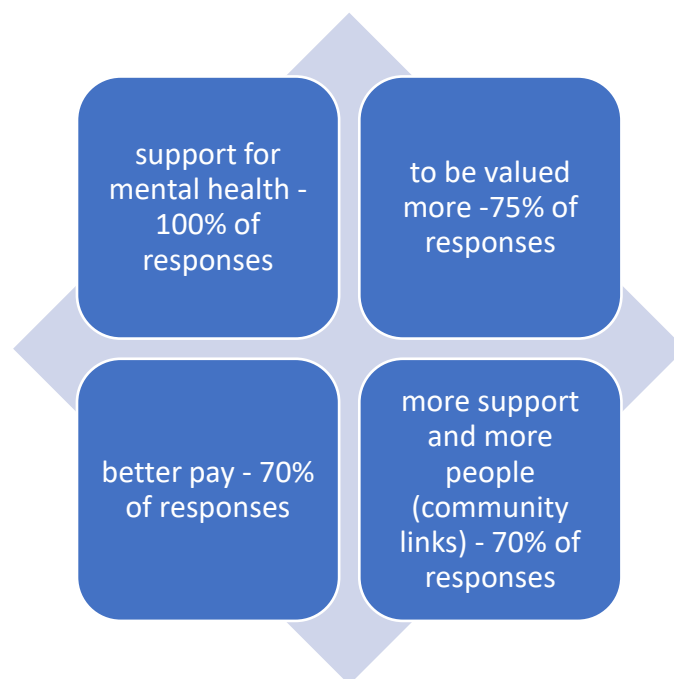
Staff mental health – along with student mental health issues many staff reported their own or colleague's problems. Many staff are seeking help from counsellors, taking time off work, or leaving the role because of what they are experiencing. Staff emphasise that they don't want to leave college, but they feel there is insufficient help available to them. Linked to this were comments of being undervalued, demoralised, unsupported. The issue of poor communication within the college management structures, was raised time and again both in the survey and in discussion and is clearly an issue that resonates across all colleges, possibly linked to the ongoing problem experienced by all managers of increased workloads.

Lack of time for students – the surveys and interviews made it abundantly clear that all staff love working with the students. They see the holistic care of students as their priority, and this includes educational, pastoral, and spiritual care. But many reported that due to pressures of curriculum, OFSTED, workload, lack of in class support etc there was no time for students and particularly not for those exhibiting complex needs.

Behaviour and other issues – there were some reports of student on staff violence, several references to poor classroom behaviour post Covid and many reports of problems with vaping. The numbers of such incidents have increased but the ability of staff to manage them has reduced. The increase in low level disruptive behaviour was linked by some staff to the lack of social skills exhibited by many students post Covid. It was suggested that they had just not adjusted to a new learning environment and learned the classroom etiquette.

One comment made was that all the above contributed to a perfect storm that was leading to burnout of staff and failure of students who deserve to be better served.

Staff needs

support for mental health - 100% of responses

to be valued more -75% of responses

better pay - 70% of responses

more support and more people (community links) - 70% of responses

Following the identification of issues facing staff respondents were asked to articulate what their needs were arising out of these issues. The range of answers are in figure 2 below but it is interesting to note that chaplaincy as a need was articulated several times, often along with increased pastoral care support. The need for more people to help from the community was mentioned in several surveys and interviews. The percentage figures relate to the percentage of respondents raising the issue in their survey answers.
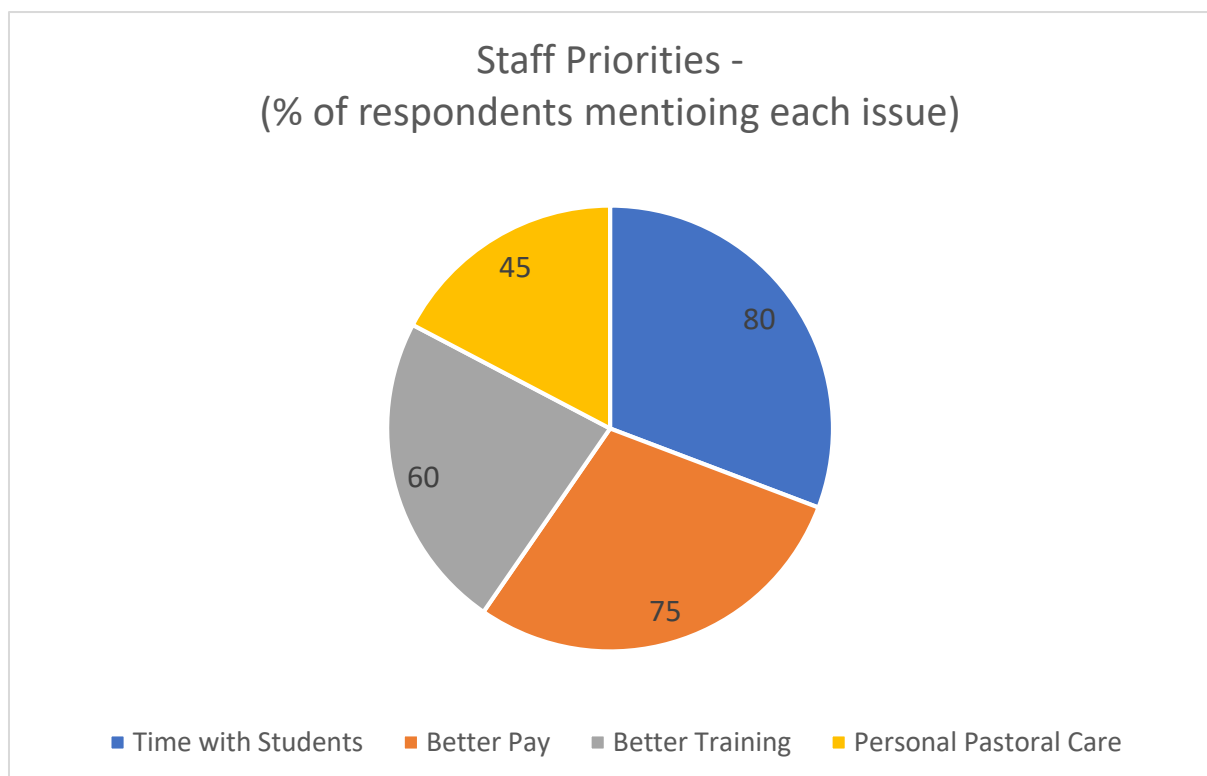
- Pay for support staff was seen as a particular issue as it led to lower recruitment and retention. Staff felt that overall pay was low when compared to other education sectors.

- 'More people' was an answer given by many. More people were needed so that existing staff could do their jobs well, students could be better cared for with more mentors/ counsellors/ chaplaincy services. One respondent commented that many staff felt isolated and lonely, and a chaplain could be company in their aloneness.

- Many staff felt undervalued and would like greater appreciation from their managers (and by implication students).

- Several respondents commented on needing a more flexible timetable that allowed them more time for students- a suggestion was made that staff should only teach 50% of their time, the rest being given to building relationships. However, conversely, some respondents suggested that staff should be allowed more time to teach and that time with students should be allocated to trained support/pastoral carers.

- Provision of supervision, mental health services and food banks to meet real needs were all mentioned as important.

- Underlying a lot of these comments is the desire of staff to be the best they can be for the sake of the student. The staff concerned joined their colleges because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people and that desire is being stifled by the difficulties they faced. These comments noted above do not derive from a selfish perspective but from a genuine desire to support and serve young people in college and as such, offer us a helpful picture of the kind of person working in the sector.

Staff Priorities

Staff priorities for the coming years were very clearly linked to the issues and needs identified. The highest scoring priority was very clear – more time for students. The ethos of staff at colleges is clearly one of compassion and care and the lack of time available for whatever reason is a source of frustration. It could be argued that what this is really saying is that the number one priority for staff are the students themselves. It could also be inferred that the engagement with the students was one of the joys of the job and the reason for choosing to be at a college. Hence a lack of that engagement diminishes job satisfaction and ultimately leads to poor staff retention.

Staff Priorities -
(% of respondents mentioing each issue)

45
80
60
75

■ Time with Students   ■ Better Pay   ■ Better Training   ■ Personal Pastoral Care

Along with care for students was an equal desire to see better pay and staff care. The sense that staff feel undervalued was very strong. Interestingly in interviews they did not blame the situation on management but on a short-sighted approach to the sector by government.

The Best Thing about College

The final question in all the surveys was always intended to capture something of the raison d'etre of working at a college. Staff were invited to say what was the best thing about working in FE. The answers had a similar theme throughout and are very instructive insofar as they point to the colleges as having a strong ethos of hope, compassion, and enterprise. Rather than present these in a chart I have chosen to list the top 10 most common answers given:

- Helping young people reach their potential and overcome barriers in their lives.
- Playing a small part in the journey of students.
- FE is a friendly place to be – the staff and students are one big family.
- Helping make a difference in student lives and helping them find happiness.
- Being part of a team sharing one vision – the best outcomes for our students.
- Being part of an organisation that is focussed on hope and potential.
- Seeing breakthrough in the lives of troubled students.
- Helping students achieve their goals and get into employment.
- The college is like a home to many of us.
- No other role is as rewarding as this – seeing lives changed for good.

These and other answers given in the survey and expanded upon in interview are important for the church to note. Any chaplaincy input would need to share these ideals, this vision, these priorities, and of course chaplaincy does in so many ways. I don't see a conflict in this, rather a complimenting of what is presented here. Chaplains focus on potential, journeying, making a difference, seeking breakthrough and so it could be argued they are a natural fit to the ethos that is already in place.

Student Needs

 The first section of this report focused on the staff of the institution. This latter part is focused on student needs, and these have been arrived at through staff assessment, student response and a student focus group. Not surprisingly there are parallels with the issues raised in the staff assessment with all parties experiencing the same impact of a pandemic and financial crisis. This section does show quite starkly the depth of need and the urgency of that need and as such, for the church, the urgency of a response.

Issues facing students

The responses to this were many and present a very complex picture. They could be categorised under four main headings: social, financial, emotional/pastoral and academic.

mental health and emotional issues - all staff and students

financial crisis - all staff and all stuidents

academic problems - all staff and some students

social issues - all staff and many students

Social Issues

Staff felt that due to the pandemic students had not developed socially and as a result were not making friends, being involved in college activities, misbehaving in class. Students affirmed some of this with reports of loneliness and inability to make new friends. Linked to this was a perceived addiction to and influence of social media as an alternative to real time socialisation. Socialisation is a key to good mental health – so there is a clear correlation with the next section.

A common issue raised by staff but not by students was the growth in vaping and its impact on college. Some suggested that over half of students were now engaged in this practice.

Both staff and students commented on a growing culture of violence – with some colleges reporting a post code gang culture which had led to students carrying knives and dealing drugs.

Emotional/pastoral

Both staff and students considered deteriorating mental health to be the biggest issue facing students today. One member of staff talked of this in terms of post Covid trauma "this is a huge impact of an iceberg upon the lives of young people that we have not dealt with holistically yet. It is affecting so many students in their formative years and will have a massive impact down the line on society as a whole. I am not exaggerating when I think that what lies ahead if not dealt with, is apocalyptic".

Some staff talked about the loss of a moral compass in students post pandemic and this affected behaviour, relationships, and lifestyle. Again, this was not an issue raised by the students themselves.

Financial

Along with mental health issues the financial crisis was considered to be particularly impactful by both students and staff. Students reported only being able to eat once a day or being on a very poor diet which affected their ability to study. Many students thought that they would need to abandon their studies to get a job in order to live. Many students were leaving college to work to help their families through the crisis. Staff recognised these pressures and most colleges approached had set up food cupboards for students who arrive without breakfast and food banks are now a regular part of college life.

Academic

Students not completing studies for reasons outlined above was a key theme and mental health issues were causing some students such problems that they were not attending classes or exams with further consequential pressures that followed. Staff suggested that certain groups were suffering more at this time and mentioned students with special needs, asylum seekers and refugees. No evidence was available in this research to support this claim, but it was mentioned by more than one respondent.

Student needs

The responses to this showed a difference of opinion between staff and students that reflected their relative positions. Staff felt that students needed – spiritual direction, moral and social guidance, better pastoral care systems with more staff and in many cases a suggestion for developing a chaplaincy style solution. Better links with external services were seen as essential and better training for staff in areas of trauma care, mental health first aid, future hope.
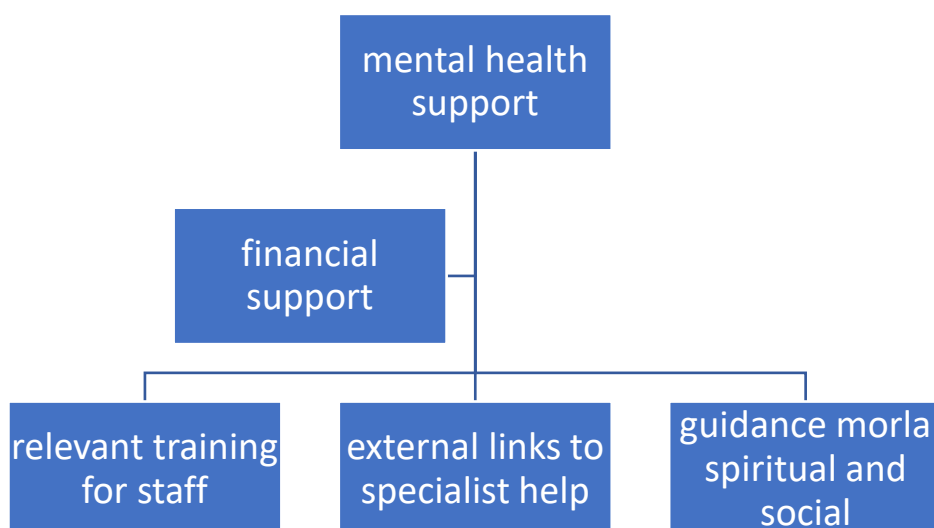
Some staff felt greater involvement in the wider community would help broaden horizons for students and give them a sense of hope and purpose.

Alongside this was a recognition of the need for some concrete solutions to the problems raised such as readily available financial support and easily accessible counselling care.
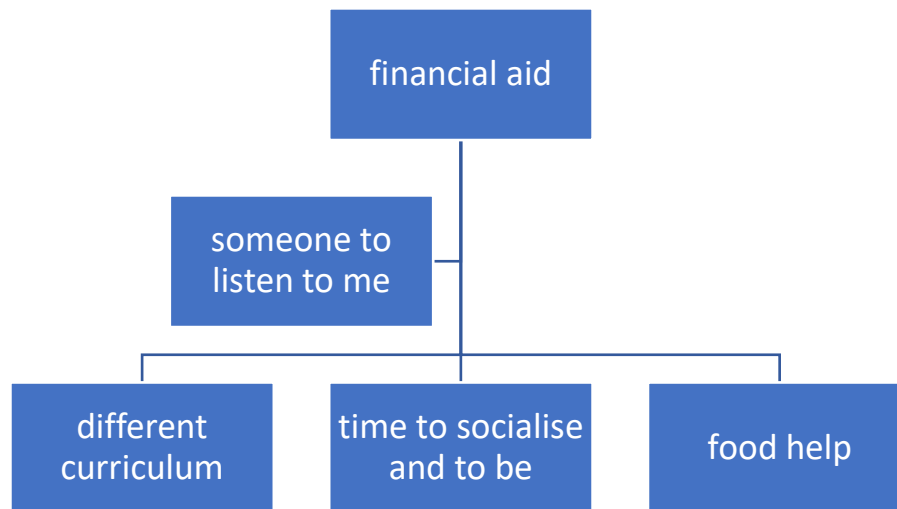
Students felt their needs were more immediate. They wanted practical help with regards food for themselves and family – free meals more widely available at breakfast and lunch. They too felt more financial support was needed and access to 'someone who will listen and help'. Many students felt that staff just didn't have time for them. They didn't blame staff for this but blamed the institution for making life too busy. More 'time to be' was a frequently expressed need.

Both staff and students felt that a new curriculum was needed to address the needs of this new world e.g., financial/mental health/the digital community. Many acknowledged the excellence of their tutor times and felt that they did go some way to meeting this need but there was a feeling these were squeezed and were not enough.

Staff assessment of needs

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  mental health  │
                    │     support     │
                    └─────────────────┘
              ┌─────────────────┐
              │   financial     │
              │    support      │
              └─────────────────┘
   ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐
   │relevant      │ │external links│ │guidance morla│
   │training      │ │to            │ │spiritual and │
   │for staff     │ │specialist help│ │social        │
   └──────────────┘ └──────────────┘ └──────────────┘
```

Students assessment of needs

```
                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │   financial aid  │
                    └──────────────────┘
              ┌──────────────────┐
              │   someone to     │
              │   listen to me   │
              └──────────────────┘
    ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
    │  different   │  │ time to socialise│  │  food help   │
    │  curriculum  │  │   and to be      │  │              │
    └──────────────┘  └──────────────────┘  └──────────────┘
```

Student Priorities

Several priorities were identified by staff and many of them were focused on issues of well-being. For students to function, to succeed, to contribute, to communicate there was an immediate priority of providing supporting adults that were not part of the existing system – more mentors, counsellors, chaplains and befrienders or listeners were seen as an immediate priority. This was echoed in many student responses and the forum about the value of having 'someone there to talk to or just listen.' The plea for someone to listen was repeated throughout student's survey replies. It is interesting that time and again students sought a listening ear rather than a guide or advisor.

Almost in contrast to this several staff felt a priority was to rebuild student resilience so that they will be better able to meet life's problems in the future. There was an implication that students might become too reliant on outside agencies and adults and lose their independence and sense of self responsibility. There was clearly a balance to be struck here.

Some staff felt that an immediate revision of the tutorial programme was a priority that would have great impact in the long run. That said, availability of staff to run revised programmes was in question and the possibility of outside help was suggested by a few.

Apart from the need for someone to listen to them students' other priority was some way of being able to afford to live. 'I can't study and eat unless someone helps me' said one student.

The Best Thing about College

As with the staff students were asked the question what the best thing was about being at college. There was not much variety in the theme of the answers. Almost all the students

said something about the level of care, support and understanding they receive. There was an acknowledgement by students that staff are trying their best even if sometimes it wasn't enough.

- Most students talked about the freedom to pursue their dreams through doing a course they wanted.

- Many students talked about how the engagement in community and charity projects made a big impact in their lives and they were glad to have been given the opportunity for such work.

- Students enjoyed the community, the chance to make new friends, the freedom, the being treated like an adult and the facilities the college offered – the library, the sports hall, the café.

- In discussion it was clear however that the support they received had the biggest impact on their ability to achieve. If they didn't have that support, if it was withdrawn, then they might not be able to complete.

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

 Despite the limitations of this research the information gathered, and the opinions voiced still present some clear themes.

There are very real and acute needs relating to both staff and students. If these needs are not met the consequences will be significant – staff departures and subsequent difficulties in recruitment, deteriorating mental health, rising student drop-out rates, lowering self-esteem, and worsening mental health for young people.

It can be stated with some certainty that many of these needs arise from the current social and financial situation colleges find themselves living through. The Covid pandemic has had a massive impact as has the current financial crisis. If the situations were different would these needs have arisen? It is hard to say without deeper research. However, some of the forces at play here are not directly linked to Covid and the financial crisis but are linked more to a strategic and political direction with regards the FE sector and so I think that many of the identified issues and needs will have arisen irrespective of the current situation. Covid and the world situation has just made them more acute.

The response to those needs is going to be crucial. Many of the ideas being put forward by staff and students involve the engagement of more skilled and trained people. There are financial implications here unless a solution can be found that involves external agencies co-operating with colleges in ways that meet the objectives of all parties.

It is my belief that chaplaincy offered through local churches, with or even without other faith group involvement, could provide a solution that begins to provide some of the answers if that chaplaincy responds to the needs expressed.

- It would be a chaplaincy with a focus on pastoral care.
- It would be a chaplaincy that facilitated practical care e.g., food bank support, finance advice in partnership with groups such as CAP.
- It would be a chaplaincy that cared for both staff and students of all faiths and none.
- It would be a chaplaincy that was not afraid to offer spiritual and moral guidance.
- It would be a chaplaincy that supported community and charity engagement.
- It would be a chaplaincy that celebrated and offered hope.

A robust theology of chaplaincy would allow for such a response. For example, a theology that embraced the concepts of chaplaincy as service (Philippians 2) chaplaincy as gift (Ephesians 4) chaplaincy as accompanying (Luke 21) or chaplaincy as a ministry of presence (John 1). All chaplaincy needs to be firmly founded on a working theology that allows for the development of practice. This theology alongside appropriate and recognised training, supervision structures, agreements between church and college, could form a ministry of

service and mission that not only met church objectives but supported colleges at their point of need.

What I believe is also clear is that any chaplaincy response needs to consider the nature of chaplaincy in a college. How many can form part of a team? As a team will almost certainly be a better solution to many of the problems illuminated by this study. What level of training is required for each member? Must any chaplain be ordained or theologically trained? Must a chaplain be trained in youth work? I offer some suggestions to this in the recommendations.

The difficulty in relation to all of this is that, even if a college was willing to accept an offer of support from a church or group of churches, how would it be funded? It is highly unlikely that full time paid posts will be available through a college budget. Are churches willing to fund such posts through their own mission budgets? If no funding is made available, then any chaplaincy offer will rely on either existing paid staff (clergy/youth workers/community workers etc) extending their current workload or changing their priorities or alternatively, teams of volunteers being recruited to do the work.

Current experience is proving that finding volunteers for work such as this is extremely difficult but need not be impossible.

Recommendations

In Luke 35.41 Jesus hears the cries of a beggar at the side of the road on route to Jericho. He hears the cry and chooses to respond to it and meet with its author. He then asks the question 'what do you want me to do for you?' . Jesus listens to the need expressed by Bartimaeus and meets that need. It is a model, lived out for us in the person of Jesus, of mission and Christian living. If we adopt that model given to us, then the church must respond to the results of this research. We have heard the cry of staff and students; we recognise the needs expressed and we have it within our power to meet those needs.

This report recommends:

- That the church prioritise support for the FE Sector through the provision of chaplaincy services as soon as possible.

- That every effort be made to bring this ministry of the church to the attention of its congregations and communities, inspiring members to recognise the vocation of chaplaincy in general and chaplaincy to FE in particular.

- That appropriate training for chaplaincy with an emphasis on FE be made available as soon as is possible.

- That discussions begin with the FE sector as to how best to serve colleges through chaplaincy.

- That skeleton documents: working standards, service level agreements, job descriptions etc be prepared in consultation with all parties.

- That funding be sought to allow for paid staff and teams of volunteers be recruited and trained.

- That further research into the distinctive nature of chaplaincy suited to the sector be undertaken to ensure that any future chaplaincy offers are appropriate and effective.

Closing Remarks

This research is a starting point for further discussion and more importantly, action. The importance of FE chaplaincy is recognised and movements to support its development are already beginning. It is important however that any such development occurs from a true understanding of the sector and its current situation and in consultation with the colleges themselves. This paper presents some ideas that can form a foundation for such consultation in the future and it is my hope that it proves to be a catalyst for mission and service.

Nigel Roberts, June 2023.

For more information about partnering with your local FE College see:

West Midlands Churches' FE Council (www.wmcfec.org.uk)