

The Education Academy

Decolonising DMU Toolkit

1:1 Meetings with Students

What is the issue/problem this resource will help to address? Context setting

When a student meets with a member of DMU staff, to ask for advice or information or to get access to some kind of resource, the interaction is based around an imbalance of power. As staff members, we are in a position of relative power; we are often the gatekeepers to what the student needs. Lots of factors influence this power dynamic, for example students' previous experiences of members of staff and other people in positions of authority, and our respective expectations about formality and informality.


Race is a particularly important factor because BAME students may feel more disempowered due to perceptions and injustices in our community and their previous experiences. Students have shared in Decolonising DMU consultation meetings how at times they have tried to speak to staff only to be met with defensiveness and a reluctance to listen, yet alone to understand. These experiences further restricted them from trying to speak to staff in the future, on the premise that it will have the same (negative) outcome.

As staff we are in a position where there are tensions between us being welcoming to students but needing to work in a boundaried way; us being open and flexible but also needing to follow rules and procedures; us listening but giving an "official" response too. And sometimes what we view as boundaries can act as barriers to students.

For example, as members of staff we should, as a matter of course, employ strategies to establish a boundaried relationship with students; we wouldn't give our personal mobile number to a student. That's for good reasons – to protect both staff and students. However, we need to acknowledge that those boundaries also contribute to the power dynamics of our interactions with students. When, for example, we ask students to wait in a waiting room until we are ready to start our meeting with them, that places us in a position of power. It gives the message that we are running the meeting – we decide when it starts, ends, and what the limits of the discussion might be. That can feel uncomfortable for students if their experience of similar power dynamics in the past has been negative or damaging.

Another important element to be aware of is the impact of the spaces where we meet with students – the design of those spaces. Desks, high counters, screens and barriers have practical functions but they also serve to create literal barriers between staff and students when we meet. They reinforce the power imbalance.

Administrative processes, procedures, rules and paperwork can also create barriers between staff and students in meetings. Usually, as staff, we are in the position of knowing more about how the university works, what the acronyms mean, what paperwork needs to be completed and by when. Again, we are in a position of relative power.



The impact of students' negative past experiences, or the negative experiences of people they know, can result in:

- Reluctance to engage with “official” university systems and sources of advice, which can lead to missed opportunities or missing out on support;
- Difficult relationships and meetings between staff and students;
- Complaints when students feel that they aren't listened to or that our ways of doing things create a barrier rather than helping them

The resource

What should one do?


We can all take a number of steps to reduce the barriers when we are meeting 1:1 with a student:

1. As a team or service, we can think about the physical space where we meet with students. Is it possible to remove or reduce the physical barriers? Do we have to sit opposite a student with a desk in between? Can we instead sit side by side at a desk? If we ask people to use a waiting area, do we have to put chairs in rows (like a doctor's surgery) or can we group chairs (like a social space)?
2. When we meet with a student for the first time, check their preferred name and ask for guidance about the pronunciation if needed.
3. Don't assume that you already know what a student wants from your meeting. Take time to listen before you act or give advice. Feeling heard is important to all of us – have you ever had the experience of coming out of the doctor's surgery with advice or a prescription but still feeling frustrated because you don't feel they listened to your concerns?

If we can work to reduce power imbalances in 1:1 meetings then it can help to foster a greater sense of community & belonging; if students feel that we are willing to listen to them and their concerns it can have a positive impact on student voice.

How should the resource be used and by whom?

Staff that meet students 1:1, whether that's at a counter, in a meeting room or at an advice desk. The advice given is based on a student's eye view of meeting with university staff.

4. Check your mindset – am I listening or am I being defensive? Am I projecting my own stress/tiredness/bad mood onto this situation? Am I ready to listen and learn?
 5. Be clear when you are referring people to other staff/services – provide clear contact details (“your faculty Student Advice Centre is on the ground floor of Gateway House” vs “you'll have to talk to your faculty”) but say if you don't know – and then go and find out (so that you know next time).
 6. Make sure everyone (including you!) understands what's going on. Ask questions to check that the student understands what's happening. Check that you understand what the student wants/needs. Avoid making assumptions about what people want, need or understand.
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Additional resources?

This meeting proforma from DSU is one way to make sure that a student feels heard and that their agenda for the meeting is addressed:

Student Meeting/Appointment Proforma

Member of Staff:

Student Name:

P Number:

Date:

Time:

Summary of Student's Issue

What resolution does the student want? Is it attainable? an alternative?

Any actions for the staff member?





Any actions for the student?

Any future follow-up meeting?

Issue Resolved?

Meeting Closure Sign- off

Matters Closed: **Yes** **No**

Date:

Staff Name:

Staff Signature:

For further information, contact
The Education Academy
dmu-ea@dmu.ac.uk

