

The Pastoral Care Focus Group: A practical strategy for ensuring consistent, coordinated and effective delivery of pastoral care support to all international students in a school setting

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Abstract

The Pastoral Care Focus Group has functioned at St Peter's School, Cambridge for 18 months. The group was established to ensure every student has ready access to effective and sustained support. School life for both students and staff is characterised by a complex and busy range of academic, extra curricular and interpersonal activities and interactions. Individual student concerns and difficulties can easily be overlooked in this setting.

The group meets weekly to discuss students at risk. A clearly defined meeting format ensures discussion is focused and relevant. Support aims to equip students with the personal skills and understandings needed to become self sufficient in coping with a problem. To ensure at risk students are reported to the Focus Group, all school staff are informed of protocols and contact points.

Meeting content is recorded on an "at risk template". This template is distributed electronically in two forms to protect student confidentiality. Information about a particular student may also be shared with boarding staff, host parents and student mentors to build a network of support for each student.

A well advertised open door policy ensures all students have quick access to one of five international support staff. Students are also encouraged to use an online booking system. Critical to the successful functioning of the group is the inclusive nature of the process. The role of the Focus Group is frequently explained in International Department publications to raise awareness among academic staff, host families, parents, and student leaders. Above all, the group aims to successfully deliver effective support so everyone has trust in the process.

Those who attend the presentation will be given an opportunity to deconstruct this model.

Introduction

This presentation describes a work in progress that will continue to evolve as staff at St Peter's develop new insights into best practice in the pastoral care and support of international students in a secondary school setting. Prior to commencing writing this paper the author spent some time searching the internet for academic research that would test or reinforce the ideas presented today. Nothing specific to a secondary school setting was found. During my presentation each of you will be given time to reflect on your own experiences and knowledge during short pair or group discussions. You are also invited to e-mail your comments and ideas to the speaker who will send out a summary to all those who have attended the workshop.

Background:

In New Zealand, the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003) explicitly describes a school's responsibility for the care and welfare of international students. Since 2001 the New Zealand Ministry of Education has provided workshops for all providers of education to international students with the intention of building awareness, skills and knowledge among international staff. Also, institutions are required to review their international programmes annually and submit a statement of completion to the Code Administrator's office. Secondary Schools additionally face scrutiny by the Education Review Office.

Despite the legislative framework, created by the Code and other relevant laws, government professional development initiatives, and the accreditation and external review processes that exist in New Zealand, individual institutions ultimately have to develop, administer and measure their own pastoral care and support policies and programmes. The Pastoral Care Focus Group was introduced at St Peter's School to ensure that the school met both its moral obligations to international students and their parents and its legal

responsibilities. The Focus Group coordinates a range of strategies and drives the delivery of pastoral care and support for every international student within the school. The development of the Pastoral Care Focus Group was informed both by the Code and its associated Guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003 and 2004) and a comprehensive analysis of international student needs within the school setting.

While primarily driven by the moral responsibility of supporting young students disconnected from family and familiar culture, the Pastoral Care Focus Group was also introduced to deliver on the school's promise to international parents that it provides a high level of individual care and support. St Peter's School is an independent, coeducational day and boarding school with a roll of 930 students, including 64 international students from 8 countries. The school's international education fee structure places it at the top end of the secondary school international education market. This means the school is in direct competition with boarding schools in Australia, Canada and a large number of American independent schools.

To attract students in a competitive market, the school directly markets international student places offshore. St Peter's has always emphasised pastoral care in its dialogue with parents and in marketing materials as being powerful aspects of the educational experience offered international students who attend the school. To ensure the school walks its advertising talk, the International Department has placed pastoral care and support at the centre of its activities. Student success is viewed in terms of personal growth, with academic progress one dimension of this growth. This philosophy is conveyed to parents in a variety of ways, beginning with marketing materials which describes the value the school places on each student's personal development.

Open and frequent dialogue with parents, via e-mail, during overseas parent conferences, in dean's reports and generic parent updates reiterates the importance the school places on holistic student development. Other policies and strategies sit alongside a focus on individual support. Well qualified and experienced ESOL teachers are employed, international student leadership and mentoring opportunities are promoted, international students are constantly encouraged to be involved in the wider life of the school, and student access to pastoral care and support is constantly monitored via student conferences that are conducted formally each term...The Pastoral Care Focus Group is one of the key ways that the International Department is able to monitor each student's social, emotional and academic wellbeing.

The challenge

At a basic level, the Pastoral Care Focus Group was initiated because it is easy to overlook a student who is at risk during the day to day rush of life in a busy boarding school. School life involves a complex range of interactions and activities on a large campus. International students are spread across all year levels and across 10 boarding houses as well as some homestays. They are involved in a wide range of extra curricular activities. They are at various stages of maturity, acculturation and adaptation to what is a very different setting for living and learning. There are 64 different personalities for staff to understand, support and grow. This complexity can only be managed by ensuring a consistent and coordinated delivery of pastoral care and support throughout the year. Following identification of the problem, a departmental meeting was called to plan and implement changes.

Implementation

The Pastoral Care Focus Group and its associated systems were shaped during an initial departmental meeting which was called to decide how the department could better meet the needs of each international student. During the meeting the department set out to describe the school's pastoral care obligations, identify student needs and work out how to systematically monitor and support students. So, first a rationale and objectives were agreed upon.

Rationale for the Focus Group

The school has a moral and legal responsibility to deliver the best pastoral care it can to each international student enrolled to ensure emotional health and wellbeing, academic progress, integration into the school community and opportunities to develop a sense of belonging and self worth.

Objectives

- To deliver effective pastoral care and support to every international student enrolled at the school
- To ensure all at risk students are supported and monitored

- To develop a collegial and proactive approach to pastoral care
- To build into the school week a focused and efficient time for collecting and sharing information about the progress and wellbeing of each student
- To support all school staff, host families and others who help to meet the academic, emotional or personal needs of each international student

Needs analysis

During initial meetings thought was also given to how to make sense of the complex lives student lead on and off campus. Our analysis of student needs was contextualised by considering student needs from four perspectives:

- Personal well being
- Critical points
- Key contacts
- Critical settings

Personal well being

Students need to:

1. Feel safe and happy
2. Make friends
3. Be able to ask for help
4. Know who to ask for help and advice
5. Feel a sense of achievement
6. Know who to look to for leadership
7. Understand their environment
8. Develop independence, initiative and organisational skills
9. Learn to make decisions
10. Develop cross cultural awareness
11. Negotiate conflict
12. Be able to contact parents
13. Develop a variety of learning strategies
14. Be treated as individuals
15. Maintain a sense of cultural identity

Critical points

Monitoring student wellbeing is particularly important at critical points in the school year:

1. Arrival and the first 4 weeks
2. Starting in a boarding house
3. Going to a homestay for the first time
4. Starting in new classes
5. Joining a sports or extra curricular group
6. Sitting class tests and examinations
7. Before and during external national examinations in Years 12 and 13
8. Preparing for holidays and during holidays and weekends
9. Returning to school from home
10. Travelling to and from home countries
11. During illness
12. During times of family crisis

Key contacts

Students interact with a large number of people who impact on their personal wellbeing:

1. Boarding house staff
2. House prefects
3. Other students in the dormitory
4. International leaders and mentors
5. Host parents and children
6. Designated caregivers and unofficial “guardians”
7. Class teachers
8. Homestay coordinator

9. Student services staff
10. ESOL teachers
11. Dean of international students
12. School counsellors
13. Year deans
14. Deputy principal
15. Sports coaches and other extra curricular organisers

Critical settings

Students live, learn and interact in a number of settings that are critical to their personal and social development and wellbeing:

1. Boarding house
2. Dormitory
3. Classroom
4. Sports teams and extra curricular groups
5. PE classes
6. Homestay
7. School grounds
8. School community

Focus Group monitoring

The Focus Group seeks to monitor student well being by meeting weekly to discuss student progress, wellbeing and risk. Student wellbeing is measured against the needs that were identified during the initial implementation of the Focus Group. Student risk is measured against their involvement in and reaction to critical points and settings. For example, extra support is provided to all students during their first month at school. All new entrants are automatically on the agenda of Focus Group meetings during this critical period. Prior to arrival, an attempt is made from enrolment data to predict the level of support that each student will need, based on indicators such as age, language proficiency, prior learning history, travel overseas, country of origin and any information about personality that has been provided by parents. Regular conferences with the dean during early weeks also provides further information. A student profile is distributed to all key contacts, including Focus Group members.

Communication and referral

Communication of the purpose and function of the Pastoral Care Focus Group to all stakeholders is essential. This is done in a variety of ways and forums. A student handbook is provided to all students, international student meetings are used to introduce students to key staff and student leaders. During student conferences students are constantly reminded about the importance of talking about a problem and who to talk to. A poster in ESOL classes reminds students about who to talk to. Student buddies attend a briefing about the kinds of challenges they can help students with and who to report to if they are worried about a student they are assisting. Parents are informed about the purpose and personnel in the Pastoral Focus Group in dean's reports and parent updates.

Staff buying into international student pastoral care is another essential in a secondary school setting. Staff must be informed and clear about the school's full range of responsibilities. This is done through the staff handbook, staff international updates which are sent out via an all staff e-mail distribution list and through documents written for specific staff members such as boarding house directors. Complementing this communication is the importance of responding quickly and effectively to staff concerns so that they develop trust in the system. In some cases, patterns may be seen in staff referrals which can be responded to at a subject level or in a particular setting such as a boarding house. Some responses may be directed at staff professional development or support rather than intervention with a student or group of students.

Prompt and open communication with parents also legitimises the work of the Focus Group. What can seem insignificant incidents to staff can loom large in the eyes of parents phoned by upset students. Parents appreciate and respect proactive communication in which the school acknowledges incidents and offers explanations of its strategies for managing them. At times this may mean acknowledging failures in aspects of the school's policies such as those dealing with harassment. Parents also appreciate being promised checkpoints rather than one off solutions to incidents. Therefore, the Focus Group will often follow up its initial correspondence with a further report to detail progress. These checkpoint communications are

intended to inform the parents about the results of ongoing support and intervention. Cooperation between international staff and parents, even when they live thousands of miles away, will often result in long term resolution of a problem, especially when combined with intervention that seeks to build student self sufficiency.

Students are referred to the Focus Group in a variety of ways, including:

- Self referrals
- Peer referrals via friends, student leaders and mentors
- Academic and boarding staff
- Parents
- Host parents

Focus Group members and meeting process

The Pastoral Care Focus Group consists of all international staff. The staff involved are the Dean of International Students, Homestay Coordinator, Student Services Assistant and the ESOL teachers. The group meets every Monday but is also in touch by e-mail and through face to face meetings as required during each week. Meetings follow a clearly defined format, beginning with a report back from each staff member assigned to a current case. It is important that meetings do not descend into anecdotal entertainment or workroom gossip. The focus must be professional support of students.

After each case has been discussed, a collective decision is made about whether it can be signed off on or is ongoing. Next, new cases are identified and discussed. The problem is identified, relevant background is given and potential support strategies are considered. The new case is then allocated to a staff member who is responsible for co ordinating intervention and reporting back to the Focus Group. This responsibility includes gathering more information and communicating as needed with other staff. Important to this process is conferencing with each student and informing other staff where they can be supportive of a student

Meetings are chaired by an ESOL teacher who also has responsibility for junior pastoral care. Meeting discussion and decisions are recorded on a template in two versions. Figure 1. The first version is for distribution to Focus Group members It records basic factual information about a student, the type of problem and the staff member assigned to the student. There is a space to indicate if the problem has been signed off on. A fuller Dean's version is password protected. It contains additional, relevant personal details and a brief summary of the intervention strategies decided upon by the Focus Group.

Figure 1. Focus group template

Pastoral Care Network Students At Risk						
Date	Name	Year/House	Issue	Issue Raised by:	Follow-up Responsibility	Signed off

Often people beyond the Pastoral Care Focus Group are involved in an intervention to build a network of support. This includes student mentors and leaders as well as staff, parents and host parents. The majority of communication within the school is conducted via e-mail as a result of the heavy workload many staff deal with on a daily basis. In most cases, face to face contact with staff will be initiated by a member of the Focus Group. Face to face meetings are necessary when the level of risk to a student is high and especially when school counsellors are brought into the process. It is normal to involve counsellors in interventions involving serious emotional distress. This policy ensures peer review of the situation. However, one of the advantages of the Focus Group process is the opportunity for a collegial approach to pastoral care delivery.

Pastoral Focus Group intervention

A wide range of issues affecting each student's life within the school and its wider community are dealt with. This reflects a holistic interpretation of what it means to deliver pastoral care. Issues resulting in intervention include:

- General emotional distress and unhappiness
- Initial adaptation and acculturation problems
- Relationship and friendship issues

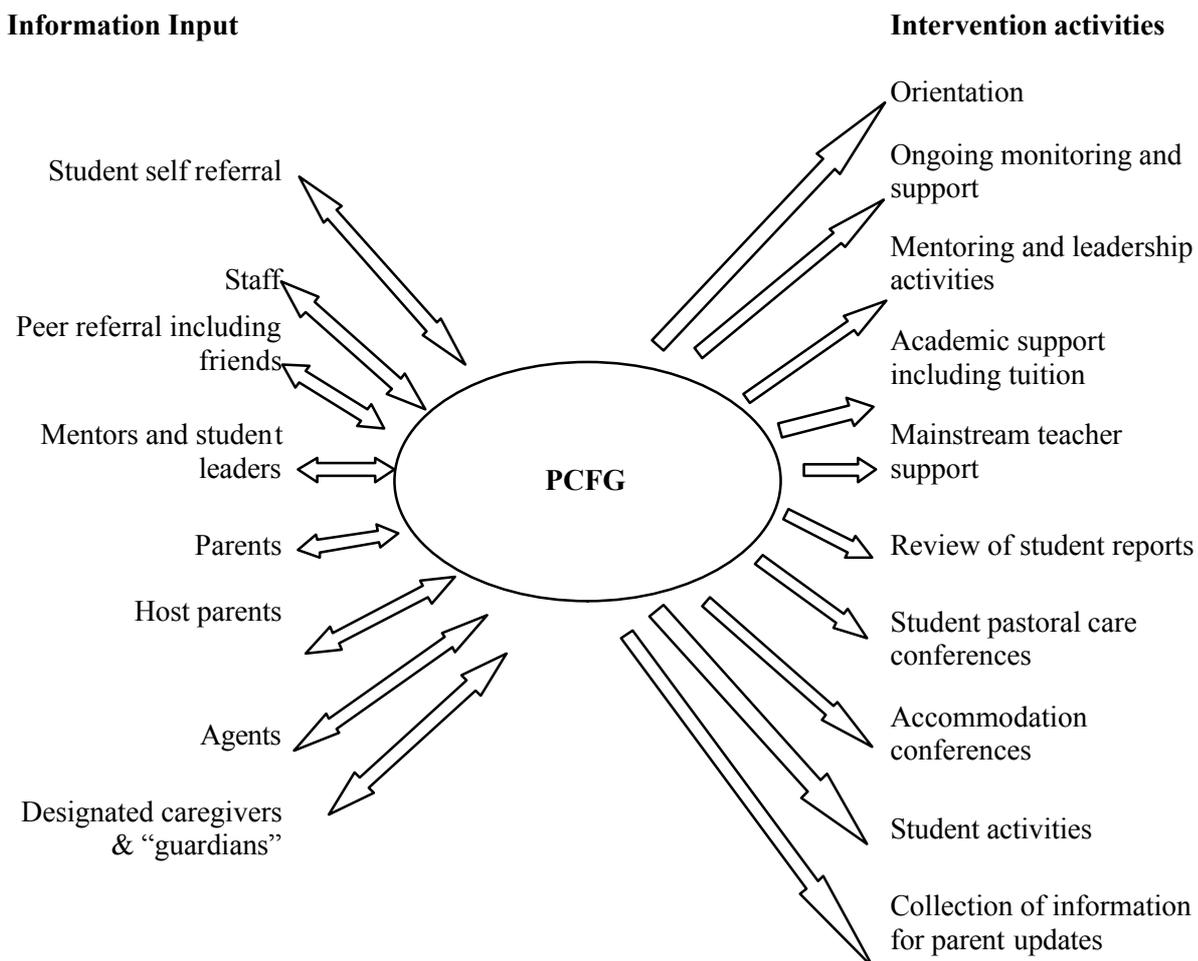
- Academic difficulties, including poor results
- Family issues such as divorce
- Accommodation difficulties in boarding houses or homestay
- Isolation within the school particularly as a result of a lack of involvement in the wider life of the school

The wider context

Once individual cases have been discussed and allocated, the Focus Group meeting deals with any generic pastoral care activities. For example, there may be decisions made about the content of the international dean's report for that particular term. The dean's report draws together information about a student's progress from a variety of sources and provides both students and parents with a holistic picture of a student's progress, including academic, social and personal dimensions. Sources of information include student reports, student conference records, and student self reporting in a number of questionnaires. Common themes picked up in the dean's reports include academic progress, friendship, and involvement in school life. Dean's reports may be authored by a number of international staff.

The Pastoral Care Focus Group is involved in a number of other generic support and monitoring activities. Figure 2. By involving all international department staff and concentrating on pastoral activities at one point in the week, there is probably a much more consistent and concerted impact on the wellbeing and progress of international students. The Focus Group takes responsibility for orientation activities, mentoring, academic support, including tutoring, and termly student conferences. One other obvious advantage of this approach is the development of pastoral support knowledge and skills among a number of international staff. During a busy school year this becomes crucial when a staff member is away for an extended period or when staff leave the school.

Figure 2. Focus group activities



The Focus Group functions within the wider context of other support strategies. Especially important is the effort put into student mentoring and leadership. As a result of the International Department's emphasis on the value of participating in leadership opportunities in parent updates, dean's reports and during international meetings, many of the current Year 12 and 13 students are involved in some kind of academic mentoring, peer support or organisation of social activities. This involvement and each senior student's personal skills are described in a comprehensive reference supplied to each graduating student. Parents and students have come to highly value these references, further motivating student involvement. This peer support is a powerful strategy that adds significantly to the work of the Focus Group.

Success measures

There are some indicators that provide a measure of the success of a planned, holistic and integrated approach to the delivery of pastoral care and support at St Peter's school;

- 100% participation in extra curricular activities
- The majority of students expressing an awareness of support available during term pastoral care conferences
- The majority of students being able to identify staff or students who can assist them with personal difficulties (evidence from pastoral care conferences)
- Students rating pastoral care staff highly in term questionnaires
- High NCEA pass rates in 2003 and 2004 exams
- Parents rating pastoral care support as the most important school service in a survey conducted in November 2004
- Willingness of staff to communicate concerns about students to the international department
- A generally positive attitude among school staff towards international students
- High retention of students

Conclusion

The Pastoral Care Focus Group has been a significant innovation at St Peter's School. It has made a difference to international student lives. Since its introduction there have been few student at risk situations that have surprised international staff. Most intervention has been able to be made early before a problem has become so overwhelming that it has threatened student safety. Of course, not all emotional problems are resolved and some students require ongoing monitoring and support to assist them to cope with anxieties and stresses in their lives. Above all, the collegial, shared, and proactive features of this approach have enabled staff to better get to know each student as an individual, to support each student in times of stress or crisis and to celebrate successes. International students living away from home need to be able to interact with concerned and committed adults. The Pastoral Care Focus Group is one method for getting trusted adults alongside young international students at times when they need support and recognition.

References

- New Zealand Ministry of Education, December 2003, Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students
- New Zealand Ministry of Education, September 2003, Guidelines to Support the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students
- New Zealand Ministry of Education, March 2004, Guidelines for Education Providers Enrolling International Students under the Age of 14 or in Years 1-8

Important-the most significant response or change or addition

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