



Interpersonal skills at London Metropolitan University (LMU)

About LMU

London Metropolitan University (LMU) is one of the most diverse universities in London. As well as providing access to students, many of whom would otherwise have been unable to enter higher education, LMU transforms lives through excellent education. Many of its students come from sections of society that are disadvantaged when accessing education and employment, and LMU gives them the skills to stack the odds in their favour.

LMU is also a global institution with worldwide partnerships with education organisations. Providing opportunities for students to access high-quality provision in their own countries, this academic institution collaborates with a host of international organisations to support their aims. The output of its excellent research has a global impact.

In 2020-21, LMU had a total of 12,525 students. Within this cohort, 143 distinct nationalities were represented, 82% of students were mature, 55% of students were from a minority background and 13% had a known disability.





The Challenge

The university asked PEAR to support academics in positions of responsibility to develop strong interpersonal skills and behaviours.

Like other universities, LMU rightly cherishes a culture of intellectual freedom and independence; their academics are encouraged to think creatively and differently. Academic staff are assessed on their research and their teaching, which is, in the main, a solo activity. The associated culture and solo working practices tend to generate idiosyncratic ways of thinking and behaving. Furthermore, many academics rarely need to teach or research in teams and are not practised in collaborative ways of thinking and behaving. Put simply, they value their independence and do not like to be told what to do.

All academics are working in a competitive higher education market. Today's students have tremendous choices, and universities are publicly assessed, ranked and compared. All universities have significant levels of additional work outside of teaching and research to make the organisation function. This includes curriculum development, appeals processes and the assessment processes used to look after students' academic, housing and pastoral needs.

Many academics in positions of responsibility, such as course leaders, principal lecturers and heads of departments, work with their colleagues regularly. They also need to influence peers or colleagues who do not report to them to ensure that things other than research and teaching get done.

Influencing other people can be very stressful. Many of those in positions of responsibility work long hours and are committed to providing the best outcomes for students. These hours can result in frustration, stress, poor sleep and other unhealthy outcomes.

When academics need to collaborate and work together in a team on issues beyond research and teaching, the value of such additional tasks may be challenged. Academics are articulate and passionate people - perhaps higher education attracts people who flourish working in this way. Deriving a balance between individual and group accountabilities can be challenging, and this tension requires our clients to use their interpersonal skills effectively.



Our solution

We provided individual coaching to academics, who were in positions of responsibility, to develop their interpersonal skills.

These individuals come from different schools within the university, and each person's needs and goals varied. Sessions were client-led, and PEAR provided a coaching structure and process.

Effective outcomes that the academics tended to focus on include feeling more in control, not feeling stressed, experiencing less frustration and improved wellbeing.

They also wanted to develop the following skills: assertiveness, influencing, giving feedback and being collaborative along with compromising, handling disagreements, effective communications and having difficult conversations.

Using a mix of online and face-to-face coaching, PEAR worked hard to listen with compassion and empathy, quickly building trust in the working relationship. When appropriate we acted as a thinking partner, asking challenging questions and offering insights.

We helped the academics avoid focusing on government policy, higher educational sector changes, and university-wide culture and not waste their energy trying to change things that were largely beyond their control.

PEAR also helped them push back on behaviours they could influence - those of colleagues, line managers and, of course, their own and helped to ensure that actions were realistic and grounded.





The Impact

Effective and behavioural goals were achieved and PEAR helped LMU's academic staff to build and develop their interpersonal skills. After coaching, individuals found that they were more effective, less stressed, more confident and better able to influence others.



They not only gave me lots of techniques and approaches to addressing managerial issues but they also provided a space for me to reflect on my current practices/assumptions

Course leader



I'm definitely a better manager as a result of these sessions and that benefits everyone that I work with from colleagues to the organisation.

Academic



These sessions have provided me with an amazing opportunity to see that and to benefit from external expertise. It also demonstrated to me that it's really important to have external support in senior roles when you are new in the role because you want to be able to explore experiences/scenarios beyond the line manager relationship

Head of Department

