**The PAWS Project - Promoting And Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Assistance Dogs**

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**Overview of Project**

There is a growing concern for student mental health nationally and internationally, with young adults identified as a high-risk group for mental health difficulties (Surdey et al., 2022). Mental health and anxiety significantly affect university students compared to the general population (Johinke et al., 2018). Academic performance, pressure to succeed, post-graduation plans, finances, sleep and social issues have all been cited as sources of concern for students (Beiter et al., 2015). In particular, exams are considered periods of extreme stress for college students, which can lead to poor academic performance, increased tension, and increased physiological stress (Barker et al., 2017). As a substantial proportion of students do not seek formal help (Murphy, 2017), there is a need to move beyond traditional forms of support. One example of a popular, relatively stigma free, low-cost engaging mental health intervention are Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) (Johinke et al., 2018). In third level institutions such as colleges and universities, there is growing evidence for the use of AAA (Woods et al., 2018; Johinke et al., 2018; Binfet et al., 2018; Daltry & Mehr, 2015). In particular, research has indicated that the provision of AAA during exam periods can significantly reduced stress levels, depression, feelings of isolation and has physiological benefits for college level students (Barker et al., 2016). **Therefore, the current project aimed to facilitate short, unstructured, on-campus AAA, and explore the impact on students’ wellbeing, specifically, on anxiety, stress and mood**.

Two events were run on both the St. Patricks and Glasnevin campus on 29th and 31st March 2022, respectively. These events permitted students and staff the opportunity to interact with visiting therapy and assistance dogs from the Irish Guide Dog Society for the Blind during the final week of the semester (i.e., 1-week prior to exam week). Approximately 250 staff and students got the opportunity to spend time with the assistance dogs either with their friends group or on their own depending on their preference. Data pertaining to staff and students anxiety levels, perceived stress, and mood was also collected prior to and following time spent with the assistance animals which was subsequently analysed.

The results indicate that spending time with the assistance animals had a positive effect on psychological markers of anxiety, stress, and negative mood states. Staff and students reported significant reductions in state anxiety, perceived stress, tension, depression, anger, fatigue, and confusion. Further, results also highlighted a significant increase in vigour in staff and students following their interaction with the assistance dogs.

The findings of the current study support the existing literature in suggesting that AAA programs can be successfully employed in higher education institutions to enhance staff and student wellbeing and mental health. The evidence provided in this study suggests that short, unstructured, on-campus AAA has the potential to positively impact staff and students anxiety, stress and mood. Programs such as this offer the potential to increase the awareness and accessibility of more individual and specialised services within the university, and more broadly offer a relatively cost-effective way to enhance overall wellbeing and mental health in the wider university community. This kind of impact is of particular importance during periods of high pressure (i.e. exam time), as well as transitional periods where students are experiencing significant life changes (i.e. moving from home to university), however, it could be assumed that a year-round AAA has the potential to provide wider and more sustained benefits.

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