Tutors' Responses to Student Disclosures: From "Suicidal Ideation" to "Feeling a Little Stressed"

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Abstract

Tutors in higher education are receiving and responding to student disclosures that include racism, anxiety, loneliness, legal disputes, family upheavals, physical, emotional, and mental health, bereavement, legal battles, and harassment. In many cases, this caring aspect of the tutor role is not acknowledged, allocated time in job descriptions, or accurately remunerated. This qualitative study explored how tutors experienced and managed student disclosures, the personal and professional impact of responding to disclosures, and how tutors believed they could be better supported. Data was collected from two cohorts of participants tutoring at a University in Aotearoa New Zealand. using interviews and questionnaires and analysed by reflexive thematic analysis. Our findings showed that our participants believed they were positioned vulnerably between a rock and a hard place. At the rock, tutors were told to follow university guidelines and refer distressed students to over-loaded course coordinators or over-subscribed support services. At the hard place, tutors were often the first to be disclosed to, because of their front-facing positioning at the university and once they had heard the disclosure felt it was unethical not to try and help. Tutors believed they could assist students with personal challenges if their precarious positioning within the university was protected and strengthened and if appropriate support was provided by their university through training, time, and remuneration. Findings have implications for higher education providers to reconsider how tutors are supported to support students.

Practitioner Notes

1. Students disclose a wide range of circumstances to tutors, ranging from general stress to grief, sexual assault and suicidal ideation.
2. Tutors are personally impacted by disclosures and may struggle to create boundaries between work and home when supporting a student.
3. Tutors desire specific training in order to prepare them to respond to student disclosures.
4. Tutors feel that the pastoral component of their role is largely unacknowledged and unremunerated.
5. Tutors navigate complex class dynamics when hosting conversations around sensitive topics, attempting to balance keeping individual students safe alongside the wider class.

Introduction

Tutors in Aotearoa New Zealand, (also referred to as teaching assistants/fellows, casual or sessional staff, and adjuncts), occupy a frontline teaching role in higher education (HE). Undertaken by under- and post-graduate students, the university tutor role encompasses responsibilities including planning and delivering learning, creating and sourcing course materials and resources, supporting students with their learning, monitoring attendance, marking, and working collaboratively with other tutors and academic staff (Gilbert, 2017; Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013; Wald & Harland, 2020). They are also mentors and role models (Campbell et al., 2023; Sutherland, 2009) all while focussing on their own learning and well-being.

Tutors are required to build and sustain individualised, positive relationships with students, identify and attend to concerning behaviours, and care for students' well-being (Kahu & Picton 2019; Marston 2022). This latter caring frontline role of pastoral support is often not recognised in job descriptions, workloads, or remunerations (Campbell et al., 2023; Kahu & Picton, 2019; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021; Simpson et al., 2022). The positioning of tutors in universities as "straddling a most interesting divide" (Earwaker, 1992, p. vi) between teaching, learning, and caring, has been explored for over 30 years. More recently tutors positioning has been described as "a taken-for-granted phenomenon in higher education" (Walk & Harland, 2020, p. 43). Tutors described themselves as feeling they only "precariously belonged" (Marston, 2022, p. 5), that they were "invisible" and their work "unrecognised, peripheral or hidden, less valued, and overlooked" (Rapley & Talbot, 2022, p. 1). For many tutors the emotional supportive aspects of their role remain unheeded and unheard (Marais, 2022; Payne, 2022).

Literature

Academic Staff: "Well-placed but ill-prepared and under-equipped"

Previous research examining student disclosures has focussed predominantly on academic staff. Academic staff reported concern about not being able to tell the difference between normal and serious health challenges, and feeling unable to gauge when formal support should be suggested (Hughes & Byrom 2019; Laws & Fiedler, 2012; McAllister et al., 2014). They felt confused about their role in managing student disclosures in terms of how involved they should become and knowing how to set and maintain boundaries was an ongoing challenge (Marais, 2022; Payne, 2022; Spear et al., 2021). This confusion and uncertainty posed additional risks (Hughes & Byrom, 2019). Academic staff are unsure where their teaching responsibilities ended, and caring responsibilities started; or when it is appropriate to refer students to support services.

The professional cost and emotional impact of their involvement caused concern to academic staff, as did their confidence in their ability to provide the correct support (Hughes et al., 2018; McAllister et al., 2014; Priestley et al., 2022). Gulliver et al. (2018) contended that many academic staff were both dealing with their own mental health challenges and not addressing their own mental health needs. Academic staff felt well-placed but ill-prepared and under-equipped for the role (Hughes et al., 2018; Laws & Fiedler, 2012). Additionally, some staff believed that supporting their students' well-being was not a component of their role, beyond the parameters of their employment, not factored into their workloads, and simply not in their job descriptions (Hughes et al., 2018; Ethan & Seidel, 2013). Those academic staff who felt confident about attending to students' disclosures and providing support had professional or personal knowledge and/or experiences around mental health (McAllister et al., 2014). They were compassionate, empathetic, had strong self-awareness and knew how to access support for their students and themselves.

Students: From "trust" to "embarrassment"

Students are more likely to disclose when they have a trusting relationship with their lecturer or tutor (Brohan et al., 2014; Genfi, 2022), when there is less stigma associated with their disclosure (Gulliver., et al 2018; Osborn et al., 2022), and when the disclosure is required to access additional support services (Woodhead et al., 2021). Self-disclosing well-being challenges can be complicated and difficult for some students (Eccles et al., 2018; Woodhead et al., 2021). They may be embarrassed (Nuttall 2019; Valanzola 2021), concerned about appearing vulnerable (Woodhead et al., 2021), being stigmatised or labelled (Gulliver et al., 2018: Priestley et al., 2022; White et al., 2022), or wish to remain independent and not be a burden (Schreuer & Sachs 2014). Previous negative experiences of disclosing personal information can make students wary (Svendby, 2020), they may not have a formal diagnosis or documented support for their challenge (Woodhead et al., 2021), or simply not know who or how to ask for help (Priestley et al., 2022).

When disclosures do occur, it is often to friends or family, rather than to an academic staff member (Kirkner et al., 2022; Whitehill et al., 2013), making a formal diagnosis and access to skilled support less likely (Woodhead et al., 2021). Additionally, students from marginalised and non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to disclose but more likely to experience well-being challenges (Ethan & Seidel, 2013; Huyton, 2009; Spear et al., 2021; Wilson, 2022; Woodhead et al., 2021).

There has been limited research exploring disclosures from HE students to academic staff and even less that considers disclosures to tutors within HE (Woodhead et al., 2021). As discussed above, the concerns expressed by academic staff are complex and challenging. As such, tutors who are already precariously positioned within universities could be experiencing exacerbated costs to their well-being. This gap in the literature includes how prepared tutors are to respond to disclosures and the impact of various disclosures on them as professionals.

This paper investigates how prepared tutors are to respond to student disclosures of distress, how they are impacted by the disclosures, and how they attend to their own well-being. We define

disclosure as a student revealing something distressing beyond their academic identity which could impact their academic identity, and distress as being worried or troubled about an experience or memory in such a way as to interrupt or impede day-to-day life. We frame well-being using the Living Standards Framework (LSF) which acknowledges that there are multiple key indicators for well-being in Aotearoa New Zealand (McLeod, 2018). On an individual level this may include health, engagement and voice, knowledge and skills, cultural capability and belonging, safety, family and friends, and housing (Treasury, 2022).

In this paper we explore how tutors in an Aotearoa New Zealand university responded to student disclosures of distress. Our research questions are:

1. How do tutors experience and manage student disclosures?

2. What is the impact of student disclosures on tutors: personally, and professionally?

3. How can tutors be better supported to respond to student disclosures?

Method

Settings and Participants

There were two cohorts of participants in our study, and both were purposefully selected tutors working at a medium-sized University in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study was first advertised via departmental mailing lists inviting tutors who had experience of responding to student disclosures to participate. Those who expressed interest in the research were asked to recommend the study to others, as such we also used snowball sampling (Creswell, 2015). This entailed initial participants contacting colleagues that they felt would be interested in also taking part. Three participants were recruited in this manner. In total, eight tutors across three faculties agreed to be interviewed.

As we wanted to determine the representativeness of the first cohorts' views, and explore the trustworthiness of our initial data, we recruited a second wider population of potential participants through invitations to an anonymous online qualitative questionnaire. We received one hundred and seventy-three responses, of which 48 tutors met the inclusion criteria, and provided data for this study. In the Findings, I.1 refers to a response from a tutor who was interviewed, and Q.1 refers to a tutor who completed the questionnaire.

Data Gathering

Prior to the interviews participants signed a consent form. Semi-structured interview questions included "How would you describe the role or purpose of a tutor at university?" and "Can you tell me about a situation where a student disclosed something to you?". Information sheets were both emailed and physically handed out to participants. These information sheets contained a section on where participants could go to access support if the interview conversation elicited distress.

This was an important ethical consideration due to the study's focus on potentially distressing student disclosures.

The questionnaire was prepared as a Qualtrics questionnaire with open-ended questions adapted from the semi-structured interview questions. The initial prompt for the questionnaire stated "Students sometimes disclose emotionally challenging information to tutors (e.g., a loss of a loved one, challenges with mental distress, feeling overwhelmed, etc.). We are interested to know about your experiences with respect to this." The questionnaire was advertised throughout the university with posters providing QR codes and links. Participants were required to record their consent before being given access to the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed orthographically by the first author and then analysed by each author for codes, categories, and themes using Braun and Clark's (2013) reflexive thematic analysis. We then met to discuss the codes they had identified and re-read the data for clarification and resolved any arising disagreements. Categories were identified and subsequently themes were generated which were then refined, defined, and named. Questionnaire responses were downloaded to an excel spreadsheet and the data were read for commonalities, additions or contradictions to the interview data codes, categories, and themes. We collaboratively discussed the findings and clarified any discrepancies.

Ethical approval was obtained from the university ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from participants.

Results

Our participants were dealing with student disclosures that ranged from "suicidal ideation down to simple things like just feeling a little stressed" (I.4). Disclosures included racism, feelings of anxiety, isolation, and loneliness; disputes and overwhelming responsibilities with family, friends, and flat mates; personal, family, and friends' physical and emotional health and well-being, crisis management, hospitalisations; bereavement and anniversaries of bereavement; court cases and legal disputes, sexuality, identity, gender, harassment; and doubts about programmes of study and assessment results.

Our findings clearly showed that in addition to teaching the course content, tutors are being positioned as race relations conciliators, grief therapists, counsellors, programme and study advisors, and security. The following examples from participants illustrate the diverse scope and complexity of the disclosures encountered. We have intentionally included a wide range of responses due to the paucity of research on how tutors respond to student disclosures. We deemed it important to demonstrate the breadth of experiences that tutors are engaging with.

> Māori (indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) students talking
> about their experiences being at university, them being isolated and

coming from places where they felt much more at home and fitted in and coming here and not feeling that at all. (I.1)

I had someone email me talking about how mentally they weren't doing okay because it was the anniversary of a friend's death. (I.2)

I had one student come to me and say one of the other tutors who was a guy was making her uncomfortable, and she would like to switch into my tutorial. I didn't ask any questions there. I was like "Yeah, just do it. I'll do the admin." (I.3)

Sometimes they say, 'look I've suffered from suicidal ideation in the past, just letting you know I might not show up to class sometimes, but I am currently seeing a counsellor about this' (I.4)

I got an email from a student, they said that they had been struggling really bad with anxiety and couldn't bring themselves to come to tutorial or lecture even, and was there anything they could do to make it up (I.5)

I've had conversations with quite anxious students being like 'should I keep going with law? Should I drop out? I got this mark in this test, is it going to be okay?' sort of thing. (I.6)

I had one student disclose, almost very casually after class, 'I can't attend the tutorial because I have a hearing as I was assaulted by a family member.' And I was like 'yeah, of course, that's totally fine' and I was empathetic. (I.7)

… she'd been harassed by a guy in the carpark on the way up to campus (I.8)

Tutors' questionnaire responses provided additional examples of disclosure content.

I have had a student approach me about the loss of a parent. I didn't really know what to do in that situation. (Q.4)

I had a student come to me about self-harming. I was completely unprepared for this and didn't even know how to handle it. (Q.9)

Sometimes [disclosures] involve people who are young parents for example and how they are struggling or more personal things, such as injuries or traumatic experiences. (Q.29)

One student once explained that they were going through their trans transition. I was not aware at all of how I could support them. (Q.47)

These responses demonstrate how tutors must navigate a wide range of potential disclosures, some of them involving traumatic events and suicidality. They also

indicate the complexities inherent within any disclosure. They evoke questions of safety (for both tutors and their students) and intersectionality. Disclosures from Māori students about not fitting in reflects demonstrate how universities in Aotearoa New Zealand are monocultural and often unwelcoming to Māori (Theodore et al., 2018). A tutor's response to these disclosures would be mediated by their own positionality and knowledge. The same is true for many of the other disclosures listed above, which include identities of young parenthood and gender. This complexity creates a challenge for tutors, who often must formulate a response within the heat of the moment.

"Disclosures of sexual violence, mental health issues, victimisation, self-harm, and suicidal ideation are common enough to be unsurprising".

All tutors agreed that it was preferable to have students who are confident and trusting when disclosing their challenges, as opposed to students who felt they had to self-manage or ignore their troubles.

> Some might have something come up in a class, or just be carrying stuff around with them and then finally they're in the company of someone they can talk to. It's really positive … as opposed to people either toughening it out or thinking it's [their disclosure] not valid. (I.6)

Disclosures were made to tutors predominantly through email, as an explanation to support an assessment extension request; a shared finding across other research (Abery & Shipman Gunson, 2016: Woodhead et al., 2021). For example, Tutor I.2 explained that "People email me to get an extension, and that's when they disclose things going on in their life". Tutorial discussion topics and course assignment tasks can also prompt students to disclose. Tutors described such discussions and assignments as "sensitive", "loaded", and "heavy". These discussions were important because they provided opportunities for students to disclose experiences and feelings, but they had to be carefully facilitated by the tutors within a safe environment.

> those papers that talked about fairly sensitive issues …there's a lot of personal life experience being brought up in these environments …which meant that students do open up in that classroom environment rather than feel like they're just learning facts about something. As a tutor, I'm there to facilitate in a safe way, which can be difficult to navigate. (I.4)

Disclosures were also made by students through assignments that required self-reflection and reflexivity. Sometimes the tutor had an existing relationship with the student and other times they did not. Tutors felt challenged to discern from their student's writing if the student was dealing with the impact of their disclosure appropriately.

> it was someone who was not in my tutorial, I'd never met him before, and he disclosed abuse in his essay in quite a lot of detail because it was an ethnographic essay which means you tell a story. And I wasn't expecting it and was like 'holy shit!". And he kind of said a few things which made me think "okay, you aren't processing this correctly, this is a bit worrying." (I.1)

Face-to-face disclosures were less commonly received by our participants. Students disclosed challenges informally during or after tutorials, or formally during a meeting with the tutor. Disclosures in this context were often prompted by discussion topics that students had a personal connection with.

> And I did have one incident where we were going over eating disorders, and someone had to leave the tutorial. And so, I went out to talk with them, and they disclosed that this was something they had issues with. And they felt they should leave. So that was one of the only in-person times that someone has disclosed mental health. (I.2)

These findings indicate that course content influenced student disclosures and demonstrate critical nuance in how tutors navigated their response. In some cases, they were able to have a private conversation with the student but in classroom environments they needed to pitch their response to consider the safety of the wider class as well.

"We are structurally positioned … front facing… and connected with students".

Tutors acknowledged they were often directed by the university to refer students to other people and support services within the university, and to not personally engage with students' disclosures. However, Hughes and Byrom (2019) identified that "sticking to the boundaries" of a role and signposting a student to a support service was "personally challenging" (p. 1543), because most people had a natural tendency to want to help. The reality was that our tutors were seen as being the most approachable and accessible person who had the closest relationship with the students (Wald & Harland, 2018), and as Tutor 1.4 noted: "I cannot avoid dealing with disclosures." Tutors felt that caring was an inevitable part of their role (Hughes et al., 2018; Laws & Fiedler, 2012).

> We are repeatedly told that dealing with such disclosures is not in our job description and we should escalate to our course coordinators. This ignores that disclosures WILL happen. Tutors, as frontline teaching staff who develop relationships with students, will be the focus of these disclosures as they are much less threatening than lecturers. (Q.48)

> We are the ones students come to first because we are approachable, usually closer in age to them, and they feel comfortable speaking to us.

> Puts us in a very tricky position because we want to help but it really takes a toll. (Q.45)

The university's direction that tutors should not deal with disclosures or provide support resulted in an ethical quandary for tutors. Students showed they trusted their tutors by disclosing to them and tutors felt they should reciprocate that trust by providing support. This was even more important when the student disclosed a crisis and doing less could result in tragedy.

> We can't just dismiss our students, but that's what happens when we just say, 'go to this service'. It also, if it's a crisis situation, means that student feels dismissed by us because we haven't done the human response of taking their issue and making sure they feel held by us, feel heard, feel supported. They've got to feel these things before they can do something about it. (I.8)

> The only formal advice I've been given is that this isn't my job and that I need to send the student to the course coordinator, which is not only sometimes inappropriate but also an unsafe way to manage disclosures. (Q.14)

As with findings from other recent research (Bantjes et al., 2023; Osborn et al., 2022; Payne, 2022), tutors expressed concerns regarding their awareness and knowledge of university support services, and the availability, effectiveness, and confidentiality of those services.

> I feel I am not knowledgeable enough and have not been provided enough information from the university about which university service I could refer them to. (Q.5)

> I try and refer to student health. However, this seems disingenuous when I know the waiting times for these student health counselling services are very long, and from previous experience do not offer real help until it is a crisis-type situation - the person is suicidal. (Q.20)

> Probably the trickiest thing to navigate is issues of student confidentiality in those disclosures and when it's appropriate to say, 'Okay this is well outside my field' and when it's time to go to someone else but A: who do I go to and B: is it appropriate for me to share personal information of students and C: who else do I tell in the department? So, there's a lot of stuff to navigate there which I've always found a lot more challenging than how I respond. (I.4)

Additionally, tutors were aware of the extensive demand that university student services already faced and were hesitant to make referrals when they knew that support would not be provided immediately. There were times when the student had already sought support from university support services, but they could not get an appointment soon enough and so turned to their tutor for help.

> The advice to refer troubled students to an already overburdened student mental health service is wholly insufficient. The administration's position shows that they care more about the legal and financial risks faced by the institution than about student or tutor welfare. (Q.24)

> Often students come to us in desperate situations, and they are unable to get support from other avenues of the university - they cannot get a student counselling appointment, so we try our best. We have no choice but to face these situations, as what else can we do if they cannot get hold of student counselling for another few weeks? (Q.25)

For tutors, responding to disclosures took a significant amount of their unpaid and unrecognised time. They provided support and guidance above and beyond their job description.

> So, there's a recognition that you will have to do this extra social and emotional labour, but there's no training for it, and you don't get reimbursed for it. (I.1)

> The university needs some sort of recognition or compensation for the emotional pastoral support work we do - work that we are structurally positioned to do in the university because of what tutors are, how front-facing we are, and the face-to-face connections we make with our students. (I.8)

University staff who operated within a 'low-trust' model, and required evidence of students' challenges, such as a medical certificate, created extra work for tutors, and an unsafe environment for them and their students.

> This system of proving health challenges changes the relationship between tutors and students and makes it harder for us to create emotional boundaries and protect our own mental health in our work environment. The strictness of other schools means that students come into it with this expectation that they have to relinquish private information to get the minor support they need which is usually just a few days extension (Q.43)

This system held by some schools increased the emotional labour of tutors, prompting students to disclose personal circumstances that they may have otherwise wished to remain private. The need for students to 'prove' they needed support meant that students entered extension conversations by sharing private information, placing emotional pressure on tutors who often bore the brunt of extension requests.

"I felt prepared, but I don't think some of my colleagues did".

Aligned with academic staff (McAllister et al., 2014), the tutors in this study drew on their prior experiences and training to guide them in responding to student disclosures. Previous

experiences and training included well-being and disclosure training, answering mental health helplines, support work, self-directed professional learning, and development (all outside the university), and residential advisor positions, tutor training, tutoring, and research (all within the university).

> I've had well-being and disclosure training for 2 years outside of tutoring and that is what I relied on (I.1)
>
> I have previous training as a youth worker, putting me in a position to deal with these situations. (Q.13)
>
> I am a clinical psychology student and have lots of experience with supporting and I feel supported and confident to support them in an effective manner. (Q.3)

Tutor Q.48 felt very strongly that they had had to take full responsibility, preparing for their role.

> While I feel moderately competent dealing with such disclosures, I must be clear it has nothing to do with support from the university. The university provides no training for these situations, and it provides no formal support once they have occurred.

Tutors who felt ready for the role had mentally prepared themselves and felt confident about their own well-being.

> I came into the role aware that things like this might come forward and was mentally prepared to not get weighed down by them and provide what help I could, rather than trying to do things I'm not equipped to do. (Q.33)
>
> I would say I am well mentally, so these sorts of disclosures haven't affected me. (Q.16)

Another tutor felt that their own mental health better positioned them to provide support.

> I have a mental illness myself, so I kind of get where the students are coming from. (Q.10)

Some tutors felt they could anticipate and prepare for disclosures, because they had facilitated similar discussions that led to disclosures in previous courses.

> So, it felt familiar, and I knew what to expect. (I.5)
>
> So, I'm used to hearing about that [domestic violence] … So it didn't trigger any debilitating emotional response with the exception of "oh god that's an awful thing to happen." (I.7)

However, some expressed concern about their tutor colleagues' readiness to provide support.

> However, many other tutors are much less experienced than me and may struggle with these kinds of disclosures. (Q.3)

In cases where tutors already had previous training and experience, these tutors still had to adapt, to meet the specific needs of individuals or groups of students. The students, their disclosures, and the extent to which the disclosure affected them all differed. Moreover, their particular learning circumstance and integration into the university community was variable as well. Because of this, tutors had to contextualise solutions to meet learner needs on a "case by case basis" (I.4).

> So it's kind of hard, you have to navigate people's opinions and people's thoughts, and different people... students might disagree on something that's quite sensitive. (I.2)

> Students would sometimes say they thought they were going to feel uncomfortable talking about those things, but they were fine; others said that it raised situations where they don't feel comfortable. (I.4)

As part of their preparation, tutors were required to organise the learning opportunities, anticipate students' emotional responses to discussions, and instantly navigate the unexpected. Tutor I.7 found it stressful to "have to think on the spot and respond to things that are outside the discussion question".

"And suddenly, 'oh shit there's a disclosure', now I got to deal with this."

It was common that tutors felt unprepared to respond to student disclosures. The unpredictable nature of disclosures, the urgency with which they needed attention, and the uncertainty about what tutorial discussions might trigger disclosures caused concern for tutors.

> Yeah exactly, how do you respond in a sensitive way to a disclosure that's so personal? (I.4)

> It comes at the randomest [sic] of times, in emails or in person so there's never a warning. (Q.22)

> This kind of information is frequently disclosed, and I don't feel that I have the capacity, training or positioning to be able to appropriately support students. (Q.43)

Not knowing what to say or do, and worrying they might say or do the wrong thing, was very stressful for tutors who completed the questionnaire. Imposter syndrome was evident, as tutors had to position themselves as being more capable than they believed they were (Campbell, et al., 2023).

> I had no previous knowledge on how to deal with the situation. We don't get much for supporting students who are struggling or neuro-diverse, but this is often a big part of what we do. (Q.9)

> I'm genuinely uncomfortable in these situations because I do not know what is the best way to handle them. I'm concerned what I say in a traumatic situation is making it worse for them given that I have no training and quite obviously I cannot provide the support a trained counsellor can. (Q.25)

As part of their university training, tutors were made aware that students may disclose mental health challenges and challenging personal experiences and were advised to "just be nice about it, be prepared" (Tutor I.1). However, there is a significant difference between saying nice consolatory words and being able to provide support. Tutor I.3 felt such a placatory approach was insufficient when considering "the very broad range of situations we face". Tutor I.5 stated that they were warned by their course coordinator that "some of the subjects can be quite sensitive so just be aware of it," but were not told anything "explicit about handling it."

> I think we were told in the tutor meetings that you respond with resources and kindness, but there's only so much you can do. You're not trained to do anything necessarily deeper than that. (I.7)

Regardless of whether they felt prepared or not, when responding to disclosures, tutors acknowledged the students and their disclosure, showed empathy, sought to understand what the student asked of them, and asked if and how they could help.

> So, responding in a considerate way … saying things like … "'Thanks for disclosing that to me, I know it's not always easy to talk about those kinds of issues. I really appreciate you bringing this to my attention.' Part of the way I respond to students is by figuring out whether they are tied into other services, whether it's formal or informal...preferably both. And that helps me decide how to engage in the future and whether to tie them in with other stuff. (I.4)

The preparedness of tutors to respond to disclosures varied, depending on whether they had prior experience with well-being training or work. Tutors wanted to respond to students, with empathy. However, some felt stuck when faced with unfamiliar situations that they had not personally or previously experienced.

"Goodbye all of my needs and where I'm at."

Not all participants responded to questions about their well-being and self-care. This could be because they were concerned about being judged as not being able to manage this aspect of their role, or that it "might reflect badly on their professional capabilities" (Huyton, 2009, p. 14). Tutors said they worried about the way they responded to disclosures, and about the short and long-term effectiveness of their help. Tutor I.6 found it very difficult "to disconnect, to desensitise, to decompartmentalise" from the student and their disclosure.

> I was stressed if I did the right thing. I felt I should double-check to make sure they weren't in distress and that they were getting the support they needed in that moment. (I.2)

> I have had disclosures which have made me keep in touch with the student more frequently to ensure they are ok. (Q.11)

> Often, I feel quite helpless. It's difficult not to cross a boundary. (Q.32)

> I'm so concerned for this student's safety and don't know what else I can do and I 'm starting to get really stressed about it. (Q.44)

One tutor reflected that by supporting students, they had also learned better ways of supporting themselves.

> It affected me in a positive way in the sense that I continue to learn how to respond to my students' needs and that I can apply those to my personal relationships. (Q.19)

Tutors were asked to share how they looked after their own health and well-being. The responses were worrying, and begs the question" Who is caring for the carers?" (Persky, 2021).

> ...not really to be honest. (I.1)

> My MO [modus operandi] for any disclosure no matter the circumstances is 'Goodbye all of my needs and where I'm at'. I'm entirely there for what that person needs". And in the long run, not a very good strategy, working on that one. (I.6)

Despite the numerous challenges our participants faced, they still believed that "tutors can manage this work with support and fair compensation for the extra hours it adds to our role" (Q.14).

Discussion: Positioned Between a Rock and a Hard Place

The immediately apparent finding of our research showed that disclosures are a fact of life for tutors. This is reflected in both the experiences shared by our interview participants and the questionnaire results. It is completely understandable that tutors are in this position because they are front-facing, closer in age, and often seen as being more approachable (Wald & Harland, 2018). Added to this is their concern about prolonged wait times for university services and the lack of connectedness with those services staff (Bantjes et al., 2023; Payne, 2022),

Once a student has built up the courage to disclose to a tutor, tutors felt it was unethical and immoral to then ask them to disclose the same information to a stranger. They identified that students have had to overcome their embarrassment and concerns of being stigmatised or judged (Gulliver et al., 2018; Nuttall 2019; Payne, 2022; Priestley et al., 2022; Valanzola 2021; White et

al., 2022) and yet are asked to position themselves vulnerably again, due to university extension protocols. Previous negative experiences prevent students from disclosing (Svendby, 2020), and participants felt the university was positioning them and their students to have a negative experience, by not acknowledging the caring aspect of the tutor role. This lack of acknowledgement by the university meant that tutors were placed on the frontline of disclosures but received little training and no compensation for carrying out these aspects of the role. This resulted in stress, sacrificing personal well-being, and second-guessing decisions.

Findings showed that tutors' confidence to deal with disclosures differed. Some tutors are confident dealing with student disclosures and should be given the time and remuneration to do so (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021; Simpson et al., 2022). Tutors who are not confident should receive appropriate training and professional development (Hitch, Mahoney, & Macfarlane, 2018), and be given the time and remuneration. However, between these two groups, are tutors with varying levels of confidence and ability. Tutors who are confident about teaching are not necessarily more prepared to deal with student disclosures. Prior training is an advantage but may also lead to role-boundary confusion. Furthermore, the breadth and depth of training and professional development should be contextualised to this tutor, with these students, at this time. Within each group of tutors, Huyton (2009) reminds us that "it is difficult to see how ideas for collective personal and professional development could be taken forward without an institutional commitment to releasing time and resources, and a recognition that such development is essential for tutors' safe and effective working" (p. 14). Safe and effective work would undoubtedly entail clarity around the boundaries of a tutor. When assisting students, many participants second-guessed their decisions and worried about overstepping their role when helping students (Hughes et al., 2018; Marais, 2023). The ambiguity of tutor boundaries and the distress tutors felt when questioning whether they had either gone too far or had not done enough can be partly resolved through clear acknowledgement of the pastoral aspect of the tutor's role. As it stands, tutors are left to ruminate on decisions they made, without proper support for a situation that is only haphazardly acknowledged by the university. Participants regarded themselves as caring. Many had previous experience with caring roles and were most likely employed because they are caring people. But they pointed out that their university expected them not to care, and that the caring aspect of their role was not acknowledged in their workload or renumeration. They felt it was disingenuous to employ people with the right attributes and then not recognise the time required to provide care and pay them accordingly.

Personal and Professional Impact on Tutors

Tutors were impacted by student disclosures in different ways. A recurring response amongst many participants was concern. Tutors care about their students and find it upsetting when their students are going through an emotionally difficult time. Tutors sometimes felt overwhelmed, taking the emotional weight of their student disclosure home with them, and periodically checked in with the student throughout the trimester and beyond. Furthermore, the extensive range of disclosures demonstrates the difficult interpersonal encounters that tutors must navigate, as part of their role such as situations involving assault, sexual violence, mental illness, grief, and more. The seriousness of the disclosure's tutors received emphasises the urgent need to reconsider

aspects of tutor training within HE. It is not only the safety and well-being of our students that is at stake, but also that of the tutors themselves. Indeed, future research could consider how tutors may be at risk for compassion fatigue due to their frontline role in supporting students.

Tutor Training and Supervision

We write this paper against the backdrop of a recently emerged policy context. On January 1st, 2022, the Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021 (TEC, 2021) came into effect. The Code aims to reconstruct tertiary institutions as systems of support for students in Aotearoa New Zealand and states that tertiary providers must "provide staff with ongoing training and resources tailored to their roles in the organisation" (9). Significantly, this training is related to "understanding the welfare issues of diverse learner groups" (9), "referral pathways (including to local service providers) and escalation procedures", and "safe health and mental health literacy and support" (10). The Code – alongside our research findings – opens an important conversation about where and how tutors fit into resourcing and training. In our university, pastoral care often falls to central support services, however our tutors have highlighted the reality that pastoral encounters are playing out on the frontline of teaching.

Tutors' previous experiences undertaking well-being related work varied from explicit health or clinical training to self-directed professional development and research. Despite this, tutors reported feeling concerned for their peers, who may not have the same level of prior experience. Many tutors stated that their confidence to carry out their role had little or nothing to do with support provided to them by the university.

It is impossible to discuss supporting tutors without considering remuneration. Many tutors identified that the caring aspect of their role was not remunerated. Unpaid labour signifies the precarious position of tutors within HE (Simpson et al., 2022; Wald & Harland, 2020). Many tutors pointed out that they are the most front-facing teaching role within the university. They perceived a lack of pay as a clear message on behalf of the university that their pastoral work was not valued nor even considered as part of their role.

Improving tutor preparedness for supporting students is a complex proposition. The prospect of doing so may seem to endanger tutors further, creating an expectation that tutors should be the ones navigating student disclosures in addition to their teaching duties. However, as our research demonstrates, it is inevitable that tutors will receive disclosures regardless of what their job description entails. Far from endorsing tutors as support workers for students, improving preparedness helps protect tutors by explicitly acknowledging a frequently unacknowledged reality of their role and providing practical strategies for working in a 'boundaried' way. We recommend that further research could consider the types and levels of support that could be appropriate for tutors. This could include peer support models, mental health first aid (MHFA), and bolstering existing staff training. Participants identified the potential for a peer-based model, where tutors could discuss these issues and situations collectively and co-construct potential next steps. Furthermore, all tutors expressed a desire for improved staff training that provides more guidance about dealing with diverse disclosure situations. There are

opportunities here to link in with existing mental health programs. The GoodYarn workshops are mental health literacy programs designed to develop people's ability to hold compassionate conversations on mental distress (Morgaine et al., 2017). They have a non-clinical focus and are intended to upskill people working in a variety of workplaces. Modified MHFA programs may also have promise. MHFA courses are designed to empower people to support someone facing a mental health challenge or crisis. It does not train people to be counsellors, psychologists or crisis responders but is rather intended for non-mental health professionals within communities such as coaches and teachers (Maslowski et al., 2019). This would help ensure that tutors are not being positioned as mental health professionals. Discussion around further training for tutors must refrain from framing tutors as an official support worker for their students. Instead, the focus should be on helping tutors feel confident to respond compassionately to students when they disclose and understand the mechanisms for connecting the student up with the appropriate support.

As it stands, many tutors find themselves between a rock and a hard place. At the rock, tutors are told to refer distressed students to their course coordinator or support services knowing that both alternatives may not be able to help. At the hard place, the structural positioning of tutors as the frontline of a considerable amount of HE and learning, means that tutors are inevitably going to receive disclosures from their students. Our research indicates that this is precisely the reality that tutors are contending with; yet it is a reality largely unacknowledged by tutor training, the job description, the remuneration, and the university itself. Tutors therefore find themselves faced with student disclosures without institutional support wrapped around them, compromising their ability to respond effectively. Unacknowledged, unremunerated work is a hallmark of precarious work in the academy (Simpson et al., 2022), and the ambiguous recognition of student disclosures within tutoring reinforces the tutors' precarious position.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the urgent need to train, upskill, and support tutors in the tertiary sector, so they can navigate student disclosures with increased confidence. Tutors found themselves in positions where they need to respond to serious disclosures that included racism, anxiety, loneliness, legal disputes, family upheavals, physical, emotional, and mental health, bereavement, legal battles, and harassment of bereavement, suicidality, and other mental distress challenges. While the tutors in this study had some extraordinarily compassionate responses, they worried about the capability of their tutor colleagues to cope in similar situations. It is not a tutor's job to be a student's support person through difficult emotional circumstances, but it is important that tutors feel prepared to respond to disclosures efficiently the moment of a disclosure. Support and preparation will not only keep tertiary students safer, but it will also protect the tutors, who are on the frontline of university teaching and may be the first port of call for many distressed students. We echo Huyton's (2009) call for universities to "respond appropriately to the nature of contemporary learning relationships" (p. 7).

The tutor role is an essential aspect of student retention and success in universities (Grillo & Leist, 2013). Tutors are responsible for frontline teaching across universities in Aotearoa New Zealand

and have a significant impact on students' experiences. It is therefore essential for universities to support their tutors in their role, which clearly involves a pastoral component, given the close relationships formed between tutor and students. This support does not and should not be clinical in nature, or in any way position a tutor as a support person for students. Instead, it should empower tutors to feel confident to respond to disclosures within the tutoring and tutorial context and assist students to access the higher level of support required. These encounters are part of a tutor's reality, and it is past time that this is explicitly acknowledged and supported by universities. When university tutors feel valued and supported, they are better positioned to support their students (Campbell et al., 2023).

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university. The authors report no usage of artificial intelligence during this study or write-up.

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