



The Deal versus 'Horrid Life Syndrome'

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Poor health, low levels of education, bad housing and minimum wage work are some of the interlinked symptoms that have created what BBC Radio 4 calls 'Horrid Life Syndrome'. This phenomena was originally identified by American GPs who baldly called it '**** Life Syndrome'. These issues arise out of a complex web of economic and social issues and have manifested in poor, working age people, developing genuine mental or physical health problems.

Many people remain locked in a cycle of poverty while existing in a society with ever-increasing levels of inequality. And yet visions of affluence via the media and internet are impossible to ignore.

Writing recently in the Guardian, Will Hutton says people suffering from such inequalities "are trapped in poor neighbourhoods where the prospect of owning a home is a distant dream. There is little social housing and scant income support or contingent access to healthcare. Finding meaning in life is close to impossible; the struggle to survive commands all intellectual and emotional resources." In short, there is little left of a safety net for these communities.

In terms of a local picture, Manchester faces many of these problems. With the fifth highest proportion of highly deprived neighbourhoods in England, 41% of its neighbourhoods are in the most deprived 10%.

The challenges faced by low-income residents, particularly young people about to embark onto the world of work is something that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is well aware of. Its latest Work & Skills Strategy states - in addition to the usual productivity-related statements about progressing work-ready young people into priority sectors - that "health commissioning will be integrated with skills and work support to capitalise on the fact that 'good work is good for your health'.

Many cities facing the complex issues of deprivation have in the past been accused of having a culture of low aspiration. The Manchester College recognises that some students face multiple barriers - but regardless of socioeconomic or other barriers, the college aims to support and create ambition.

In addition to our extensive pastoral care services, the College has introduced 'The Deal', an innovative programme to embed this culture of aspiration in all aspects of student life. The brainchild of Principal Lisa O'Loughlin, The Deal was introduced in 2017 as a commitment by students and staff to embrace a cultural change that will ask more of both expectations and effort.



The Deal is based around the most desirable professional behaviours needed to succeed. Desirable behaviours such as have been identified, such as punctuality, team-working, ambition, determination and leadership. In addition to these general traits, there are more localised templates that curriculum areas have developed in conjunction with the students themselves, encouraging a democratic, 'British Values' type approach.

It also helps teaching staff to be aspirational in challenging students to give their best. The Deal acts as a reminder to tutors to encourage students who may have chaotic home lives or lack aspirational role-models in their families that some extra support or challenge may be needed for them to stay engaged and progress onto the next level.

Now in its second year, The Deal has been refined to make it as user-friendly for students as possible. The ideas and values of The Deal are presented in an easy-to-read infographics, displayed around campuses and discussed in personal tutor groups - with a special version for the LTE Group's higher education strand, UCEN Manchester.



Feedback from students showed that they wanted to know what was in it for them. So, since its inception, the Deal has expanded to include more tangible proof of employability qualities. These qualities reflect a wider set of calls from employers for skills beyond formal qualifications. The recent CBI/Pearson survey of businesses and skills has indicated that firms are keen to see workers with skills such as punctuality, but also team working and communication skills.

Principal Lisa O'Loughlin explains, "We saw there was an opportunity to offer added value. We already added our Digital Credentials tool to the online version of The Deal last year – this allows students to earn digital badges that can be used on CVs, applications and social media, all based on attendance and employability milestones. This year we're adding BKSB to The Deal website, a valuable tool in our delivery of functional skills, which gives it a strong sense of credibility and helps to establish The Deal as something that can offer value, not just guidance"

Although the Deal can't be a cure-all for what are deeply-embedded social problems, its potential to support some of the most vulnerable students into overcoming those barriers has already been seen. In keeping with the Deal's themes, the College is determined to be proactive and ambitious on behalf of all its students.

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