

The University of Oxford looked to explore whether their existing peer support programme could be utilised and adapted for PGRs. They reported a greater interest around PGR welfare and wellbeing than a willingness to participate and become involved in the project. This caused issues with recruitment that may be due to a disparity between individuals' perspectives and activities that they feel they have 'permission' to engage with. They also noted that establishing the project within departments proved challenging for their institution as welfare support appeared less well defined within departmental roles. They bypassed this issue by recruiting through colleges, although acknowledge that this did not fix the issue of welfare and wellbeing in departments. They also noted that clarity over time commitments appeared to have helped with sign-up and permissions to engage from supervisors. To help PGRs access training they reported that the time of day, duration and timing within the term/academic year are important issues to consider. The training in the summer proved particularly popular, with positive feedback and high attendance. They are considering whether to reduce the amount of training and provide more choice with time slots and within both term time and vacation.

Queen Mary University of London reported inconsistent attendance at a series of events on their peer support programme. They attempted to address this by clarifying expectations regarding attendance and decreasing the group size to enable a feeling of mutual dependence. The University of Warwick noted that PGRs were less likely to engage in wellbeing activities if they also included undergraduate and taught postgraduates. The University of Sussex reported that some of the reasons cited for non-attendance at their PGR workshop were researchers stating they were 'too stressed to attend'.

'We still haven't found the solution to low engagement. It becomes a vicious cycle, which is hard to break: low engagement leads to poor mental health which makes people feel unable to participate which can worsen feelings of isolation and so on.'

Project team member, Queen Mary University London

The University of Westminster developed a series of workshops looking to address the stress around writing and encourage wellbeing. Although they were created as a result of focus groups, attendance was disappointing, with only 32 of 71 registered PGRs attending. Those who did tended to find the process beneficial but found it difficult to see the link between wellbeing and writing. Focus was then shifted to writing retreats, which achieved much higher attendance levels but from the post-event feedback were less effective in addressing mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation: Senior academic leaders, including heads of schools/departments, should drive an institutional culture, reflected at departmental levels, that supports PGRs' wellbeing, outlining clear institutional expectations of their status and contribution to academic communities.

4.2 Establishing a healthy working culture

The importance of setting the right tone and establishing healthy working practices and culture from the start of the doctoral degree emerged as a strong theme. In the network meetings, projects discussed the challenge of talking to PGRs about their wellbeing, particularly at induction, without reinforcing negative language about the doctoral degree being a stressful journey.

Projects have taken different approaches to introducing wellbeing into the induction processes. The University of Bournemouth have identified that setting correct expectations about the academic challenge of doctoral study prior to beginning the doctorate is important. This ensures that the PGR has a clear understanding of what to expect and that the process should not negatively impact an individual's mental health. The University of Bradford used a one-day immersive wellbeing event to

launch their peer network model. This focussed on wellbeing activities and introduced the peer support process from the outset, allowing individuals to share experience and build group dynamics.

The University of Derby have created The Wellbeing Thesis: a website of wellbeing guidance framed around the doctoral process and designed to be a resource that can be drawn on throughout the duration of their doctorate. The website has been reviewed and approved by student panels, the Student Minds Clinical Advisory Group and the Student Minds Student Advisory Committee. Feedback included:

“I think this is a potential resource that will be invaluable to PGRs and staff who work with PGRs. Not only this, but the PGR experience is one that is not fully understood, and I think this has the potential to broaden and centralise that understanding.”

The University of Manchester have developed a PGR transition resource an online series of training modules aimed at new PGRs which guides them through things to think about before they start their journey including their wellbeing and mental health. It includes modules on the PGR community, managing expectations, healthy relationship and coping and resilience.

A number of projects offered resilience training as part of their PGR offering. However, there was discussion at the network meetings that resilience training, whilst useful, also could reinforce the view that achieving a doctorate should be stressful and therefore the obligation is on the PGR to develop resilience in order to survive. University College London included resilience training as part of their ADAPT to Grow programme and reported that survey results on completion demonstrated an improvement in resilience, but this was not maintained when they were surveyed six months on. They also measured self-efficacy, which was maintained over the six-month period.

University College London developed ADAPT to Grow, an online coaching course based on cognitive behavioural therapy, coaching and mentoring techniques. Following an application and selection process, individuals took part in four one-hour, one-to-one Skype sessions with a cognitive behavioural coach. Individuals were able to use their sessions however they wished over a six-month period. A skilled coach helped PGRs to address common concerns about navigating working relationships, recovering from setbacks and planning a career path. All participants in ADAPT to Grow were surveyed using standard, validated measures for self-efficacy, resilience and career satisfaction before, immediately after and six months after the intervention. Interviews are also ongoing to collect qualitative data. The research will be published in a peer-reviewed journal later in 2020.

The University of Portsmouth have developed a mental health and wellbeing lens on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework based on the Action Learning Sets that they undertook. Postgraduate researchers selected the descriptors from the framework that they felt were of most relevance to their mental health and wellbeing and therefore that they wanted to discuss and why. These were discussed and amended with an expert panel, which included representatives of Catalyst projects. They were subjected to wider sector consultation and scrutiny and have been developed into a resource to help PGRs better address their mental health and those that support them to be in an informed position to do so.

DOMAIN SUPPORT

This domain covers the range of support services provided by institutions for mental health, their accessibility and effectiveness, and links into external NHS and care services.

Key themes

- *Support services staff need to understand the specific experiences and needs of PGRs so they can provide appropriate and relevant support*
- *Provision of well-proven training can be successfully adapted for PGRs*
- *Signposting of services and support needs to be specifically tailored for the PGR community.*

4.3 Support services staff

The PGR population tends to be considerably smaller and have a very different learning experience compared with the undergraduate and taught masters population. The few projects that looked at PGRs' relationships with support services noted the need to ensure that support services staff understood and could respond to the issues specific to researchers. These were outlined in Vitae's 2018 report for HEFCE³⁷ and include: the pressures of doctoral research and workload management, the supervisory relationship, and feelings of isolation. Postgraduate researchers are also less likely to relate to mental health and wellbeing messages and activities targeted at the general student body. Several projects identified the risk of reinforcing messages that the doctoral experience is inherently stressful and the importance of distinguishing between 'healthy stress' due to the intellectual challenge of the doctorate and other stresses that impact on wellbeing and mental health. They emphasised the need for understanding that the experience should allow an individual to flourish and thrive rather than be an endeavour to survive.

The University of Sussex developed workshops to introduce relevant professional services staff to the topic of PGR mental health and wellbeing. The development of these was informed by the research strand of their project. These sessions were piloted with professional services staff at the Student Life Centre and included video content directly from PGRs.

The University of Manchester has introduced a mental health hub that supplants the need for a referral process to the NHS via the traditional general practice route as part of a partnership between Greater Manchester Universities. Postgraduate researchers are able to access NHS specialist services via the hub after direct referral from the institution counselling service. A resource was co-created with PGRs for counselling service staff to explain the uniqueness of the postgraduate experience and highlight specific areas of concern.

Recommendation: Professional services staff who support PGRs should ensure they recognise and understand the distinctiveness of PGRs' experiences and challenges, and that the intellectual challenge of doctoral study is not confused with unacceptable stresses that have a negative impact on wellbeing and mental health.

4.4 Other staff

Several projects noted the importance of engaging a range of staff across their institution who may be instrumental in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs. These may be, for example, academic staff with responsibilities for PGRs, graduate school staff, departmental administrators and technicians. It is important that these staff members have good understanding of how to respond, are

³⁷ https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/wellbeing-and-mental-health/HEFCE-Report_Exploring-PGR-Mental-health-support/view

comfortable with their own boundaries and know where they can access support. It therefore seems important that institutions consider all staff when training in and raising awareness of PGR mental health.

The University of Liverpool ran a sector-wide survey exploring the pastoral support that technicians provide to PGRs and how well equipped they felt to do so, which received 735 responses. This survey highlighted the role that technicians play with regard to mental health in universities for both undergraduate students and PGRs in some disciplines, with 60% stating that they had supported either a student or a researcher with a mental health issue. When they were asked what personal problems a postgraduate was most likely to discuss, the highest response was the relationship with the supervisor. The University have since repeated this survey targeting professional services staff and will report on the findings.

Recommendations:

Professional services staff with responsibilities for PGRs should explore how they can support PGRs within their role, that they understand the boundaries of their responsibilities and capabilities and know how to signpost PGRs to appropriate support.

Professional services staff should take care of their own mental health and wellbeing and act as mental health and wellbeing role models by displaying healthy working and lifestyle practices to contribute to a healthy institutional and academic culture.

4.5 Using external expertise

Institutions' relationships with external organisations for mental health provision was not a focus generally across the programme, the only project being the University of Manchester's work with the Greater Manchester Student Mental Health Hub. A number of projects used existing external support schemes or training providers to offer or enhance their training provision, such as Mental Health First Aid England, Student Minds 'Look After Your Mate' and The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust. Although these programmes were not targeted at PGRs, the projects tested the transferability of this training, adapting them for PGRs (or supervisors) to provide a straightforward and relatively easy-to-implement solution.

At least three projects utilised 'Mental Health First Aid' training offered by Mental Health First Aid England for specific cohorts. The University of Bradford commented that it was particularly valuable to their peer support facilitators and enabled them to be better equipped to facilitate referrals to appropriate agencies. The University of East Anglia reported that the personal confidence levels of the PGRs who took part in this training, in how best to support others with a mental health issue increased by 43%.

4.6 Signposting support

The importance of good signposting of support for mental health and wellbeing to PGRs was a common theme across all the projects. They generally agreed that as PGRs do not recognise themselves fully as part of the student body, nor as staff, they are unlikely to respond to campaigns targeted at these communities. Some projects reported challenges with PGRs not knowing what they can and cannot access in terms of mental health support, either because this is not currently outlined to them at the start of their doctorate or because they feel their role falls between those of students and staff. Additionally, they may feel uncomfortable accessing a service where they may also encounter undergraduate students.

Several projects carried out university-wide campaigns, often in line with other institution activity highlighting wellbeing activities and signposting support. A small number of projects mapped the support services across their institution to identify the ways PGRs, or staff, can access support for their mental health and wellbeing. In contrast to this, Newcastle University reported that their PGRs demonstrated high levels of knowledge of existing institutional provision, suggesting that they are already signposting existing services sufficiently, for example by identifying key contacts for support on individual library cards. Conversely, they did report challenges with PGRs accessing support outside the institution, e.g. NHS services, when their needs exceeded institutional provision.

Bournemouth University carried out a survey and focus groups which highlighted that an issue for PGRs was a lack of understanding of the support available and how to access it. They added additional sessions into the induction for new PGRs, created a new re-orientation session for PGRs at different stages in their research degrees and added additional training about student support into supervisor development sessions. They reported that this activity has led to a broader acknowledgement that PGRs require pastoral support, which has now been incorporated into 'business as usual' activities. As a result they have ensured that there are appropriate support structures and signposting for PGRs should they experience a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The University of Liverpool created a Campus Wellbeing Map for all PGRs that clearly identified which support services they could access. The map was launched as part of an annual university wellbeing week and was well received by both staff and researchers, with a high volume of requests to incorporate the map into the university intranet system. They are currently developing this into an app.

Recommendation: PGRs need to know how and where to get appropriate help and support within their institution, including declaring any existing mental health conditions to their institution.

DOMAIN LIVE

This domain focusses on creating healthy settings for people to learn, live, work and play. It includes culture, community and built environment. The focus is on the key themes relating to broader wellbeing activities, including prevention and early intervention.

Key themes

- *Isolation and loneliness is a common theme and structured peer support programmes are useful interventions in creating mutual understanding and purpose*
- *Wellbeing activities should be encouraged as part of healthy practice; however evidence is needed on their long-term impact on mental health.*

4.7 Community building

Many of the projects sought to create a feeling of community for their PGRs in order to address loneliness and isolation and used a variety of approaches to do so. Ongoing peer support groups appeared to be largely successful, as the structure, training and resource allowed individuals the time to engage with each other properly.

The University of Bradford created the PGR 'Connect' programme to help PGRs maintain a community that facilitated mental wellness during their PhD experience. They linked with other parts of the institution, for example the Student Union, for social events or with faculty leads to create networks and increase the number of social activities for PGRs on campus in order to achieve more regular engagement. Although still at an early stage, they believe this community building is working well based on qualitative feedback from the PRES, which indicated that PGRs appreciated the university valuing their mental health.

The University of Portsmouth reported positive results from the semi-structured approach they took with their Action Learning Sets, each covering different topics selected by the groups. Postgraduate researchers found the process of engaging with Action Learning Sets to be beneficial, particularly identifying the Vitae Researcher Development Framework³⁸ descriptors that had the most positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing, for example work-life balance or self-confidence. As a group they then discussed each one in turn in a positive fashion, considering what actions they could take to make improvements in a specific topic area. The exercise provided an opportunity to discuss mental health and wellbeing with other researchers, to consider the factors affecting wellbeing and ensure that discussions were relevant and personalised to their needs.

Other projects looked to create trained wellbeing ambassadors to support the overall postgraduate community. Activities led by the wellbeing ambassadors included responding to direct approaches, drop-in sessions, wellbeing workshops and 'walk and talk' sessions. Several projects operating these schemes commented on the difficulties of recruiting peers into these positions, particularly if there were additional demands on their time. Oxford University, for example, received a lot of interest from PGRs wanting to support their project, but few were willing to complete the required training.

Newcastle University looked to create inclusive communities and ensured there was a range of activities attractive to part-time PGRs or parents. They identified that the Student Union largely catered for the undergraduate population and therefore developed a separate society for PGRs 'PGRcommUNITY'. They utilised social media to create the community and held a range of events, including barbecues, art workshop, welcome parties and a games night.

They noted that the benefits seem particularly pronounced for international and EU PGRs, one of whom commented "...events provide you with a great opportunity to make new friends and have some fun with people who are likely to understand the way you are feeling (e.g. stressed, overworked)".

A small number of projects developed online communities and reported that these provided a beneficial alternative in combatting isolation for those that cannot be physically present. The University of Sussex developed 'Peer Guidance on Setting-up Online Support Groups'. It appears clear from the projects that PGRs appreciated and benefitted from being part of a community and that it is important to consider inclusive approaches to this.

'Thanks for the simple presentation and clear info on benefits. I'm rarely on campus and struggle to meet other researchers. When I do, I feel so much better about my work – this would be perfect for me as a busy working mum.'

University of Sussex participant

³⁸ Vitae Researcher Development Framework

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework>

Recommendations:

Professional services staff with responsibilities for PGRs should consider how they can develop and sustain PGRs' peer support networks.

PGRs should develop good peer support networks to reduce the risk of isolation.

4.8 Tackling loneliness

A consistent theme from the projects for improving PGR mental health and wellbeing was addressing loneliness. Research by the University of Warwick revealed that approximately 80% of the PGRs they sampled were lonely. They collected data on personality (Big Five Personality Traits³⁹ and loss of control), psychological wellbeing (life satisfaction, flourishing, General Health Questionnaire-12 item scale), and how psychological wellbeing (loneliness, perceived stress) correlates for their PGRs and trialled interventions to address these. Their results showed that high perceived stress and poor work–life balance are common issues in the postgraduate research experience. They also identified loneliness as a barrier to wellbeing, suggesting that there is a need to facilitate the creation of a postgraduate community within academic departments.

Queen Mary University of London ran an eight-week support group for PGRs, facilitated by a counsellor and researcher, with the main aim of combatting isolation. Sessions included a 'check-in' with the opportunity for everyone to speak, and participants were encouraged to focus on the things they could change themselves, rather than systemic issues. Using the WEMBWS mean score they were able to demonstrate that reducing isolation and improving wellbeing were well met through the weekly support groups, even over a short eight-week period. Other outcomes were greater awareness of support services and increased confidence in completing their doctorate.

A PGR who attended the University of Portsmouth online support group, which was established through Facebook to organise face to face events and create a community, commented '*It has made me less isolated, so, more happy completing my PhD and less likely to feel depressed*'.

There was some anecdotal evidence around different academic disciplines and modes of study and the impact on mental health, but no clear conclusions could be drawn. The relationships between loneliness, personal and structural circumstances and mental health issues could be considered as something to investigate further.

4.9 Impact of wellbeing activities

Six of the projects delivered wellbeing activities, ranging from the University of East Anglia providing gardening space – 'PhDiggers' – to games nights for PGRs at the University of Sussex. There was general agreement across the projects that wellbeing activities were well received and enjoyable and that they had immediate benefits in making PGRs feel happier, particularly when they were encouraged to participate as part of a healthy research culture, rather than feeling that this was something that took them away from their research. However, evidence is needed on whether wellbeing activities improve mental health and wellbeing in the longer term. The University of Warwick studied the impact of wellbeing interventions through regular surveys and concluded that, while PGRs found the activities useful, they did not observe a statistical improvement in psychological wellbeing scores in their surveys across the population, taking into account both different types of activity and different personality types.

³⁹ The Big Five personality traits cover five basic dimensions of personality: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism <https://positivepsychology.com/big-five-personality-theory/>

There were mixed views from the projects on whether wellbeing activities should be stand-alone sessions or embedded within other training and development activities. There was recognition that stand-alone sessions are attractive and beneficial to some and have a role to play in reinforcing messages to researchers about the importance of considering their wellbeing. Conversely, embedding wellbeing activities into other training activities provides the opportunity to reach researchers who otherwise may not engage or see this as something that is an additional burden on their workload. The projects agreed that taking time for wellbeing activities should be accepted practice in a healthy research culture and part of what makes a successful researcher. The projects also acknowledged, however, the challenge of integrating wellbeing into existing packed programmes and pressurised time for training.

Some projects observed scepticism about wellbeing from the PGR population, particularly if it was perceived as pushing responsibility back onto the individual rather than the institution. The University of East Anglia noted some scepticism about wellbeing activities and the wellbeing agenda being seen as a 'sticking plaster' with the responsibility put on the PGR rather than on the institution.

The University of Bradford PGR Connect project highlighted that there appears to be a fine balance between PGRs taking ownership for their own wellbeing and therefore buying into interventions and initiatives, and the need for the institution to provide the space and time to do this culturally, academically and environmentally.

Queen Mary University of London had a PGR wellbeing campaign that launched with an event 'Is it just me? Discussing mental health and the PhD experience', followed by a month of workshops and activities from yoga to calligraphy. These wellbeing week activities have now been incorporated into the Queen Mary Graduate Festival. Activities were measured individually and were viewed positively by those that attended them. For example, of those that attended the mindfulness workshop, 100% of survey respondents found the workshop useful for helping them manage their mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendation: Wherever possible graduate school staff and researcher developers should embed the importance for PGRs to pay attention to their mental health and wellbeing within existing doctoral degree processes and researcher development programmes.

DOMAIN WORK

This domain is about creating mentally healthy workplaces, the cultural and structural determinants of staff mental health, as well as the need to ensure that staff can support the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Key themes

- *Supervisors have a crucial role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs and need to feel able to undertake this role, know their boundaries and how to access support; they are also important role models in demonstrating healthy behaviours*
- *The broad range of staff who support PGRs need to understand and know how to respond to PGRs raising mental health- and wellbeing-related issues.*

4.10 Role of the supervisor

Across the nine projects that developed supervisor training, there was recognition of the real need to properly equip supervisors to support the mental health and wellbeing of their PGRs. Supervisors are integral to PGR mental health and wellbeing, providing pastoral care alongside their

academic input. Given the potentially isolating nature of the PGR experience, supervisors remain key to early identification and response to emerging mental health and wellbeing issues.

Queen Mary University of London have adapted their training for new supervisors to incorporate a 30-minute session on PGR mental health and wellbeing. They also offered a three-hour workshop for existing academic staff: Supporting mental health and wellbeing in PGRs – guidance for supervisors. Feedback from supervisors was positive, with 24% of participants initially rating their knowledge as good or very good, whereas following the workshop this increased to 79%.

The University of Portsmouth piloted two-hour supervisor training sessions on mental health and wellbeing and the role of the supervisor, which they also repeated at Leeds Beckett University. They reported that analysis of feedback indicated an impact at individual supervisor level, with positive responses to the sessions and on the opportunity for supervisors to reflect on their own practice and wellbeing. Positive impacts included an improvement in mental health literacy (e.g. knowledge of support services for PGRs, confidence in raising mental health and wellbeing issues). Supervisors indicated a desire for further practical advice and supervisor support (e.g. case studies and written guidance) to support PGRs. It was felt that in order to reach all supervisors the best approach would be to use some of this content in a short session as part of mandatory supervisor training for all.

Supervisors are in a prime position to model healthy and productive working practices to their researchers to promote good mental health and wellbeing. A few projects noted that an unexpected consequence of increasing supervisors' awareness of PGRs' mental health was that it may raise awareness of their own levels of mental health and wellbeing. The University of Portsmouth reported this as an emerging theme from their supervisor training and ensured that there was effective signposting of support for staff within their workshops. Similarly, in response to feedback, Queen Mary University of London developed a one-hour lunchtime workshop on 'Looking after your own wellbeing specifically for PhD Supervisors'.

Supervisors need to feel comfortable with the nurturing aspect of their role towards PGRs, understand their boundaries, know where to find additional support and how to signpost support to their researchers. The University of East Anglia found that there was a need to reassure supervisors that they are not being expected to take on responsibilities that put pressure on their own mental health. As a result of participating in a training course, several supervisors reported they were now better equipped to have the appropriate level of conversations with PGRs and had more understanding of the boundaries. Appropriate training and knowledge of where within their institution to get support are essential in preparing supervisors for their role. In the network discussions projects also stressed the importance of having the supervisor's role (and other staff) in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of their PGRs reflected in workload models, performance reviews and promotion processes.

The University of Manchester developed decision trees for both PGRs and supervisors. This provided a map for supervisors to support their PGRs with clear questions, suggested appropriate action and signposting relevant to the institution.

Recommendations:

Supervisors, and other academics with postgraduate responsibilities, should recognise the link between good mental health and academic success for both the PGR and their supervisor, and understand the supportive role supervisors have in ensuring PGRs' mental health and wellbeing.

Supervisors should ensure they are well informed about PGRs' mental health issues and potential triggers, understand the boundaries of their responsibilities and capabilities, and how to confidently signpost PGRs to appropriate support.

Supervisors should take care of their own mental health and wellbeing and act as mental health and wellbeing role models by displaying healthy working and lifestyle practices, thereby contributing to a healthy institutional and academic culture.

Senior academic leaders, including heads of schools/departments, should ensure that supervisors, and other academics and professional staff with postgraduate responsibilities, are given the time, training and appropriate recognition for supporting PGRs' mental health and wellbeing and that it is reflected in workloads and appraisal processes.

Stepchange Mentally Healthy Universities – Enablers

Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities Enablers are five cross-cutting themes to embed a whole university approach: Leadership, Co-production, Inclusivity, Information, and Research and innovation.

ENABLER LEADERSHIP

Mentally Healthy Universities recognises strong and visible strategic leadership as a key enabler in improving mental health and wellbeing, leading open conversations and cultural change, providing the conditions for organisational improvement.

Key themes

- *Senior leadership support is essential to drive a positive culture of researcher mental health and wellbeing*
- *Postgraduate researchers need to be identified as a distinct group in institutional mental health strategies.*

4.11 Senior leadership support

Senior leadership support was a requirement of the Catalyst funding and across the programme projects recognised the value of this in delivering their outputs and subsequently their sustainability. The value of this was more pronounced for the larger projects that required a more strategic approach to their activities and the engagement of staff and departments across the institution. The reciprocal value was also recognised by leadership teams. At the University of East Anglia an executive team lead commented “*This project has really made a difference to the way the university thinks about PGRs, but also beyond it. Just one example is how the Courage work has informed and given momentum for the new staff mental health strategy*”. The project team identified this as a key element in enabling them to be more effective and achieve results, which they felt would help sustainability and continue to make a long-term impact. Communicating institutional commitment to PGRs and staff was seen as important in gaining their engagement with projects.