

wellbeing and mental health cultural change is also needed, and this takes time to achieve and evidence. They also raised the importance of formally and fully recognising the role of supervisors and other staff in supporting the mental health of PGRs, for example, within workload allocation models, appraisals and promotion criteria.

Recommendation: Senior academic leaders should provide sufficient resources to embed appropriate support and provision for PGRs' mental health and wellbeing within their institution.

5.3 Sector impact

Projects' final reports demonstrated their impact within their institutions. The challenge is to also cascade this learning across the sector and ensure that resources are accessible. To some extent this is already in progress through the dissemination activities of individual projects and UK sector bodies and the submission of academic papers to journals (Section 4.18). The most significant impact from the programme will likely come from the resources developed by the projects that are available for use by the sector. These have the potential to be used and adapted by institutions to suit their individual contexts and provide a legacy for the programme. Appendix 2 provides an overview of the resources that will be available to the sector with links to those that are currently available. All resources and project information is also accessible through the OfS website⁵².

In the network meeting discussions, projects identified that some of the challenges relating to the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs are systemic and require cross-sector engagement by multiple stakeholders. The Vitae 2018 report identified the stressors within doctoral education, including workload expectations, supervisory relationships, lack of community engagement, imposter syndrome and career prospects, that can all have negative impacts on the wellbeing and mental health of PGRs. It posited that some of these stressors could be alleviated through changes in the structure of doctoral education: making it 'less of a rite of passage' and more of an educational process. The projects agreed that there is value in instigating a UK discussion on the shape, structure and processes within doctoral education such that they evolve to better support PGRs' mental health and wellbeing.

The research culture was identified by projects as a key factor in creating a healthy working environment that requires the engagement of all stakeholders. There has been considerably more focus on the research culture recently through the work of the Royal Society 'Changing Expectations'⁵³ and Wellcome's 'Reimagine Research'⁵⁴ projects, and mental health and wellbeing is emerging as a central theme in this work. This work needs to intersect with UUK's work through 'Stepchange: Mentally Healthy Universities' in raising the profile of mental health and wellbeing for staff and students across the sector. Postgraduate researchers need to be visible communities within both these agendas.

5.4 Wider issues

Discussions at the network meetings identified wider systemic issues as possible stressors for PGR mental health and wellbeing, which were generally outside the power of individual institutions to change.

They highlighted the availability and level of funding, together with the length of doctoral degrees as creating anxiety for PGRs. They proposed that PGR stipends should be at least above the living wage and the funding period extended to cover a minimum of 3.5 years for full-time study. Suspension of

⁵² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/mental-health/resources-for-higher-education-providers/>

⁵³ <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/research-culture/>

⁵⁴ <https://wellcome.ac.uk/what-we-do/our-work/research-culture>

funding during interruptions in study was also reported as adding to some PGRs' anxieties. They suggested that collectively funders could drive institutional change by being more explicit and consistent on the expected entitlements for PGRs in terms of annual leave, maternity and parental leave, flexible working and sick leave. Funders should also embed expectations on how institutions support the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs within their terms and conditions for, and evaluation of, doctoral training programmes.

The projects highlighted that many PGRs had expressed concerns about their career potential. Research shows that career uncertainty is one of the predictors of poor mental health in PGRs⁵⁵. Currently, there is a disconnect between PGRs' career intentions and potential opportunities, particularly within academia career structures. More needs to be done to provide good information on career opportunities for doctoral graduates and targeted career guidance so they have realistic expectations and make positive career choices.

Recommendations:

Doctoral education funders should review their funding and duration of doctoral training programmes, including expectations within their terms and conditions of funding and evaluation processes on how the mental health and wellbeing of their funded PGRs should be supported.

UUK and other key stakeholders should undertake a review of how the structure and processes within doctoral education impact on the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs and what measures can be taken to address this, recognising different disciplinary contexts.

5.5 Further research

Although the difficulty of measuring mental health and wellbeing for any community is well recognised, it is important to have robust common UK measures of the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs to provide baseline data, comparability across and within institutions and to drive enhancement. Across the programme several projects gathered a variety of data on the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs. They used a range of instruments and measured different aspects of wellbeing and of mental health such that it was not possible to combine or compare data. All the projects identified the difficulty of collecting and interpreting data on PGR mental health and wellbeing.

A focussed research project is needed to build on the knowledge gained through these initial investigations to review in more depth the suitability of existing mechanisms to measure mental health and wellbeing and to contribute to sector discussions on appropriate key measures that could have applicability across the UK to provide benchmark data on the mental health and wellbeing of the PGR population.

Individuals' risk levels and experiences of mental health and wellbeing differ as a result of their personal and cultural circumstances, and structural context. Only one project explored aspects of diversity and more research is needed into why certain groups are more vulnerable to poor mental health, including intersectional approaches, and effective interventions, particularly exploring differences between academic disciplines or modes of study. Similarly, more detailed investigation is warranted into key factors influencing mental health and wellbeing, such as experiences of loneliness and isolation, and the impact of developing greater resilience and self-efficacy.

⁵⁵ Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students; K. Levecque, F. Anseel, A. De Beuckelaer, J. Van der Heyden, L. Gisle: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733317300422

Projects that included activities targeted at supervisors predominately focussed on increasing their mental health literacy. Further research is needed into the mental health and wellbeing of supervisors, their current levels of mental health literacy and their preparedness to support the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs. This should also include other academic staff who have a direct role in supporting PGRs, such as departmental postgraduate tutors and mentors. Furthermore, the mental health and wellbeing of different staff categories across institutions should be identified. This is particularly important for research staff, who face many of the same challenges as PGRs, along with precarity of employment. So far, little attention has been paid to this community, and it is likely that they are also at risk of poor mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendations:

UUK, doctoral education funders and other key stakeholders should agree common UK measures for institutions to collect data on PGR mental health and wellbeing to drive enhancement and enable benchmarking and comparability across the UK.

UKRI and OfS should commission more research into the intersection of protected characteristics with mental health, experiences of isolation and loneliness, and the impact on mental health of developing greater resilience and self-efficacy.

5.6 Future funding calls

Funding calls of this nature attract a wide variety of proposals within the scope of their funding criteria, resulting in projects that vary in scope, size, number of partners, proposed outputs and expected impacts. In undertaking the evaluation this complexity presented challenges in drawing together the diversity of projects to evaluate the overall impact of the programme. Some of these challenges may be mitigated in evaluating future programmes of this complexity by the following actions.

The networking meetings were very useful in informing the evaluation processes for both the overall programme and individual projects. They also served as an invaluable mechanism to build a community of practice across the projects and facilitate wider dissemination to the sector by the projects. There is value in continuing to provide network meetings within any future funding programmes, being clear about the purpose of these and how the projects are expected to engage with them.

In designing the funding call, clear articulation of measureable success criteria for the overall programme, potentially using the Theory of Change framework, would help identify funding criteria that directly support the ability to demonstrate the impact of the programme. These could include:

- identification of expected programme outcomes / impact indicators in the funding call documentation, while giving projects flexibility to identify which indicators apply to their proposed projects
- required inclusion of an outline Theory of Change framework showing the connection between proposed activities and expected impact in the proposals submitted
- submission of a more extensive evaluation plan, including baseline measurement and cycle of evaluation throughout the project
- recognition from the funder and the projects submitting that good evaluation takes time and resources and that this should be reflected in project plans and budgets
- running a 'supplier workshop' as part of the funding process, where potential bidders could experience using the Theory of Change process
- opportunity for follow-on evaluation activities to assess the longer-term impact of projects
- extending the evaluation of the overall programme, say, for six months after the 'delivery' of the projects to allow more evidence of longer-term impact to emerge.

These changes would result in more focussed attention by projects on evaluation, such that there is likely be stronger evidence of causality between project activities and how they collectively contribute to achieving the aims of the project and the overall programme aims. With common measures of impact, it should also be possible to assess the relative effectiveness of activities from different projects to provide useful guidance to the sector on effective practice.

Recommendation: UKRI, OfS and other funders should consider integrating evaluation more specifically within funding calls and selection criteria, and how to support projects to develop evaluation frameworks to support successful delivery and improved evidence on and understanding of what is effective practice.

5.7 Recommendations

In the network meetings and their final evaluation reporting, projects were asked to record the key messages that emerged from their endeavours and identify recommendations for different stakeholder groups. The recommendations reflect these discussions and incorporate the learning that emerged across the programme. Those targeted at senior institutional leaders, supervisors and professional services staff have been incorporated into three stakeholder briefings, which can be accessed on the Research England website.⁵⁶ While acknowledging that there are structural and cultural issues that need tackling, we also include recommendations on how PGRs can take care of their mental health and wellbeing. Finally we include recommendations that require wider sector engagement, including funders, which emerged from the network discussions.

The Catalyst Fund programme and its evaluation were completed before the Covid-19 pandemic. The associated restrictions create new challenges in terms of potentially intensified mental health issues and in implementing some of the recommendations in the report, for example activities such as building networks and in-person events. These need to be conducted in a way that adheres to government and institutional guidelines for social distancing.

Senior institutional leaders, including heads of schools/departments, should:

- make mental health and wellbeing of PGRs a key priority and acknowledge PGRs as a distinct population in their institutional mental health strategies
- drive an institutional culture, reflected at departmental levels, that supports PGRs' wellbeing outlining clear institutional expectations of their status and contribution to academic communities
- provide sufficient resources to embed appropriate support and provision for PGRs' mental health and wellbeing within their institution
- regularly collect robust data on PGRs' mental health and wellbeing in a structured whole institution approach to enable benchmarking, identification of areas of concern, highlighting of good practice and monitoring progress
- ensure that supervisors, other academics with postgraduate responsibilities and professional staff 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.

⁵⁶ <https://re.ukri.org/research/postgraduate-researchers/>

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

Professional services staff with responsibilities for PGRs should:

- ensure they recognise and understand the distinctiveness of PGRs' experiences and challenges and are able to distinguish between the intellectual challenge of doctoral study and unacceptable stresses that have a negative impact on wellbeing and mental health
- consider how they can develop and sustain PGRs' peer support networks
- 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
- 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
- wherever possible embed the importance for PGRs to pay attention to their mental health and wellbeing within existing doctoral degree processes and researcher development programmes
- be flexible in the timing, duration and types of training and other interventions to provide an inclusive programme that attracts the widest engagement from PGRs.

Postgraduate researchers should:

- pay attention to their wellbeing and mental health during their doctoral studies, actively seeking ways to engage with wellbeing activities within and beyond their institution
- develop good peer support networks to reduce the risk of isolation
- find out how and where to get appropriate help and support within their institution, including declaring any mental health conditions to their institution
- assist in developing institutional and sector understanding of PGR mental health by responding to requests for feedback about their mental health and wellbeing from their institution.

Wider sector recommendations

- UUK, doctoral education funders and other key stakeholders should agree common UK measures for institutions to collect data on PGR mental health and wellbeing to drive enhancement and enable benchmarking and comparability across the UK
- Doctoral education funders should review their funding and duration of doctoral training programmes, including expectations within their terms and conditions of funding and evaluation processes on how the mental health and wellbeing of their funded PGRs should be supported

- UUK and other key stakeholders should undertake a review of how the structure and processes within doctoral education impact on the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs and what measures can be taken to address this, recognising different disciplinary contexts
- UUK, doctoral education funders and other key stakeholders should recognise and promote PGRs as a distinct community within sector work on mental health and wellbeing, and into the research environment and culture
- UUK and other stakeholders should consider how existing networks can be utilised to support future work relating to PGR mental health and wellbeing and the sharing of effective practice
- UKRI and OfS should commission more research into the intersection of protected characteristics with mental health, experiences of isolation and loneliness, and the impact on mental health of developing greater resilience and self-efficacy
- UKRI, OfS and other funders should consider integrating evaluation more specifically within funding calls and selection criteria, and how to support projects to develop evaluation frameworks to support successful delivery and improved evidence on and understanding of what is effective practice.

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