PROJECTS OVERVIEW

An introduction to the 17 Research England Office for Students Catalyst Fund projects.

#MHWBRIGHTON
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Introduction: Research England & Office for Students

Research England and the Office for Students are working together to support the wellbeing and mental health of postgraduate research students (PGR) in English universities. The scheme was launched by the former Higher Education Funding Council for England, informed by the interim findings of the work carried out by Vitae (to understand the factors affecting the mental health and wellbeing of these students).

Providers were allowed to bid for up to £150,000 on the condition that they also invested their own resources. In their proposals they had to outline whether they would expand existing, successful provision or develop new activities, and demonstrate how these activities would be sustained beyond the period of funding. Further information is available on request pgrcatalyst@officeforstudents.org.uk

In March 2018, £1.5 million was allocated to 17 projects. The projects are running to January 2020. Information about the funded projects are available here: www.re.ukri.org/research/postgraduate-researchers/#catalystprojects

Research England have contracted Vitae and Universities UK to evaluate the impacts and outcomes of the 17 projects. The aim is to develop a set of resources on effective ways of working which can be shared across the sector for the benefit of all postgraduate students. In particular, the aim is to encourage case studies of where improved interventions are supporting or have resulted in improved PGR outcomes.
We report on the outcomes of an HEFCE Funded study undertaken at Arts University Bournemouth and Bournemouth University during the Summer of 2018.

The study explored the personal challenges that Post-Graduate Research (PGR) Degree students face during their studies and sought to reveal those factors which may support, and which may impact negatively, on their welfare.

The study also sought to understand what PGR students’ expectations are of the demands of study prior to, and during, enrolling and what information would have helped them to make the transition to minimise impact upon their wellbeing.

It also sought to clarify the nature and degree of organisational, supervisory and personal support mechanisms that may help PGR students to progress with their studies whilst maintaining their mental health and wellbeing.
PGR Connect: A peer support initiative to promote connectivity and mental wellbeing for the postgraduate researcher community at the University of Bradford

The key focus of PGR connect has been to develop an integrated and sustainable approach to PGR mental wellbeing by aligning a peer support mental wellbeing initiative with core teaching and learning strategies and the researcher development framework.

It has focused on building peer support networks amongst researchers to support social connection and foster a sense of belonging. Bespoke training for connect peer facilitators has ensured the model remains truly peer-led and it has been strengthened by an additional focus on fostering engagement across the whole researcher community.

Collaboration and consultation with researchers and key support services including counselling and academic skills liaison has enabled responsive wellbeing interventions to be designed and delivered. These have been embedded into the researcher induction and training programmes promoting an early intervention approach that is contributing to a cultural shift and a growing ethos of mental wellness within the research community.

CONTACT

Louise Futter
Project Manager
University of Bradford
lfutter1@bradford.ac.uk
The University of Derby

The Wellbeing Thesis - Surviving to Thriving on your PhD

This project will provide a national, open access web-resource that takes a prevention and early intervention approach to support PGR student wellbeing via a partnership between the University of Derby, King’s College London and Student Minds. Aiming to bridge the current gap in need the website will provide proactive, psycho-educational resources considering the whole PGR experience to support positive cultural change towards good mental health.

Co-produced with PGR students at Derby and KCL the project utilises the expertise of all partners involved in creating effective, evidence-based psychoeducational interventions to improve mental wellbeing. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis will be collected to evaluate.

Dissemination of the resource will be facilitated via a partner communications plan and learning from the project to be consolidated into journal articles and a national report to be shared across the sector and presented at relevant conferences.

CONTACT
Catherine Stuart-Jervis
Project Manager
The University of Derby
c.stuart-jervis@derby.ac.uk
Durham University has been awarded a grant to develop an online educational resource to support postgraduate research students’ mental health and wellbeing. This will focus on the role of the supervisory relationship, and the training resource will help both supervisors and their supervisees.

The aims of the project are to:

- Identify and address mental health needs within the supervisory relationship to promote early intervention
- Recognise the specific role of supervisors in supporting mental health and wellbeing, and identify the limits of that relationship for resolving wider mental health difficulties
- Prevent the development or exacerbation of mental health symptoms by identifying the helpful and unhelpful relationship patterns that can emerge in supervision.

Work to create the programme will begin in June 2018 and finish in January 2020. The finished programme will be available nationally, across the Higher Education sector. The project will be a joint effort between Durham University and three Doctoral Training Partnerships - NINE, Northern Bridge and IAPETUS. Durham Student’s Union are supporting the project and postgraduate research students will be on the Project Reference Group.
The 'Courage' Project. To support prevention of, early intervention in, and cultural change around mental health and wellbeing problems among PGRs

The 'Courage' project is researching and piloting innovative approaches to support the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs. It is a partnership between the University of East Anglia, UEA Student Union, University of Suffolk and Norwich Bioscience Institutes. The project was inspired by UEA Student Union's Honesty Project (2015-16), which found 77% of respondents had suffered stress whilst studying, while nearly half experienced isolation and loneliness. The Courage project builds on insights as to how these problems might be addressed.

With these in mind, the project is formed of eight 'strands', led by both students and staff. They are improving self-resilience and institutional practices, informed by academic research, and communicating findings across the sector.

CONTACT

Dr John Turnpenny
Associate Dean for Postgraduate Research
University of East Anglia

j.turnpenny@uea.ac.uk
The Institute of Integrative Biology is an Athena Swan Gold department with health and wellbeing embedded in our action plan. Our PGR Catalyst project has been developing and piloting a multi-layered training and development framework developing targeted interventions for various stakeholders with an interest in PGR wellbeing.

After running the Vitae ‘Wellbeing of doctoral research’ questionnaire locally, we introduced a Peer Wellbeing Ambassador scheme offering bespoke training and support to those taking on the role. Mental health and wellbeing training has been added to the Postgraduate Certificate Academic Practice to be completed by all new academic staff and we are developing online training modules for academic supervisors and those in other student facing roles.

Collaborating with key external partners (Science Council’s Technician Commitment and learned societies) a sector wide survey to technical staff has shone a light on the important but unrecognised pastoral support they offer to students. Piloted interventions will be rolled out across the University and shared across the sector to have a positive impact on improving PGR mental health and wellbeing.
The PGR Well Bee-ing Project is one of 17 projects taking place across the UK funded by the Office for Students and Research England.

The aim of our project is to better understand wellbeing and mental health issues from a PGR perspective and improve and tailor our provision, support, and resources for our PGR community at the University of Manchester. The project is coordinated by the Graduate Education Team and involves academics, colleagues from student support, researcher development, the library, the counselling service, University of Manchester Students’ Union, and PGR reps.

More information about the project can be found on our Twitter page @PGRwellbeingUoM and on the project website: https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/pgrwellbeing/
#PGRWellbeing4All: tackling inequalities, improving wellbeing

Newcastle University’s PGR Wellbeing4All project is one of the 17 OfS/Research England Catalyst funded projects investigating the mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate graduate research (PGR) students.

The PGR Wellbeing4All project has a specific focus on equality, diversity and inclusion, and is exploring the potentially unique factors that impact the mental health and wellbeing of individuals from diverse backgrounds when undertaking a PGR degree.

In addition, the project is investigating the importance of the supervisor relationship in the context of supporting the mental health of students from diverse groups. The findings from the research will be used to inform the development fully inclusive strategies, policies, training, and initiatives that support the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs at Newcastle University and, through the Catalyst project, all higher education institutes across the UK.

CONTACT

Paul Britton
Project Manager and Research Lead
Newcastle University
paul.britton@newcastle.ac.uk
This project is about increasing Peer Support Training for PGR students at The University of Oxford. The Peer Support Programme at the University of Oxford was started in the 1990s. It has historically been more present in colleges (34 currently) and has greater involvement with UG students than PGR students.

This project aims to improve inclusion of departments and PGR student representation. Evidence has shown that students are more likely to approach a peer for support than a more senior individual or those further up in a hierarchy in the first instance. Seeking support from senior staff might also bring feelings of shame, guilt, doubt or fear around perceptions of competency/ performance/ ability. Seeking support from peers can lower these barriers.

The training has been enhanced for PGR audiences after consultations with PGR students and staff. The training content has been modified to include PGR themes and issues and the timing of the training has also been altered to maximise PGR attendance.

CONTACT

Dr Tim Knowlson
Peer Support Programme Coordinator
University of Oxford

timothy.knowlson@admin.ox.ac.uk
The Peer Support for Postgraduate Research Student Wellbeing project at the University of Plymouth sees PGRs in at least the second year of their PhD deliver wellbeing workshops to new PGRs. Our Workshop Leaders received 12 hours of induction training in mental health awareness and had the option to complete a Mental Health First Aid qualification. They were trained to deliver five workshops, badged as Researcher Development Sessions to avoid stigma around accessing mental health support. The workshops cover topics such as fostering a positive mental attitude and how self-care leads to success.

The project takes a prevention-rather-than-cure approach. Workshops promote good working practice, increase resilience, and reduce negative thinking. They promote mental health literacy by increasing students’ awareness and reflection, enabling early, self-identification of issues, and providing the tools to take action before problems escalate. Peer delivery is key to facilitate networks of support and reduce stigma.
The University of Portsmouth project focusses on increasing mental health literacy and social support across PGR programmes.

We know from previous research that increased knowledge about mental health increases the likelihood that PGRs will seek help if they need it and that supervisors can take the appropriate actions to support students.

We are embedding mental health and wellbeing in induction and supervisor training, underpinned by online resources that are tailored to the specific needs of PGRs. We are also developing action learning sets, linked to researcher development training, which will provide opportunities for social interactions and networking across programmes and departments.
The Catalyst funded project at Queen Mary University of London involves:

1. Introducing emotional resilience and resourcefulness sessions for PGRs during PhD Induction and annual Cohort Days, as well as expanding the existing ‘Survive and Thrive’ four-part training programme for PGRs.

2. A weekly Support Group for PGRs, facilitated by a Counsellor and a Researcher Developer. The Group is available to PGRs who need support with personal and emotional issues that can obstruct academic progress. This includes PGRs who have a pre-existing or emerging mental health disorder/problems or mental distress.

3. Delivering a PGR wellbeing campaign and events across the 5 dimensions of wellness. The aim is to address issues like social isolation, toxic sub-cultures of overwork and ableism, and promote a culture of support.

4. Developing a new workshop, ‘Supporting mental health and wellbeing in PGRs: a guidance for supervisors’, and other resources for supervisors to cover pastoral support.

Project webpage: [https://academicdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/researcher-development/researcher-wellbeing/catalyst-funded-project/](https://academicdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/researcher-development/researcher-wellbeing/catalyst-funded-project/)
ADAPT: Supporting the mental wellbeing of postgraduate research students

ADAPT is a programme of preventative mental wellbeing support for postgraduate research students (PGRs) that focuses on building resilience. ADAPT was developed by the UCL Academic Careers Office (ACO) to support the clinical academic community in the UCL School of Life and Medical Sciences. The programme has been expanded to include non-clinical students in related disciplines (life and physical sciences) and with partner institutions – the NIHR Academy and the University of Nottingham.

All participants in ADAPT to Grow and ADAPT Together will be surveyed before, immediately after and six months after the intervention. Attendees of ADAPT to Thrive will complete feedback surveys after the event to identify positive actions inspired by the event. The resulting learning will be published in a peer-reviewed journal and will inform the development of a template that other institutions can use to replicate ADAPT locally.

The ADAPT programme has benefited from meaningful input from PGRs throughout its development and implementation. PGRs were engaged through one-on-one conversations, focus groups, surveys and in a structured fashion at conferences. This deep engagement with the community continues alongside the development of the programme.
The University of Sussex project aims to develop an evidence-based model for the Higher Education sector to address the challenge of doctoral researcher mental health.

With a particular focus on prevention and early intervention, the project is organised into five strands, overseen by a project board with representation from academic faculty, postdoctoral researchers, doctoral students and professional services staff.

With limited existing research, our mixed methods research seeks to improve understandings of the mental health needs of doctoral researchers studying in the UK, and the factors that may influence and be influenced by doctoral researcher mental health.

Our findings are feeding into: The development of our supervisor and staff training; resources to enhance doctoral researcher awareness of mental health and the support on offer both within and beyond the University; and an exploration of ways to improve referral and access to evidence-based psychological therapies.
PROPS: Postgraduate Researcher Online Psychoeducation and Support

PROPS is a project aiming to develop a digitally-enabled support environment for postgraduate research students. We are working on a new version of our existing app (SAM), a version which will enable the delivery of tailored and personalised content to researchers.

This will provide self-help, information and advice around the common challenges that students encounter which, unchecked, have the potential to adversely affect mental health and wellbeing. The app also will provide access to online spaces where PGR students can interact with one another to provide a peer support network.

In addition, it will provide tools to connect PGRs with academic and wellbeing support services for monitoring and to enable earlier intervention in cases of concern.
Personality is one of the strongest predictors of subjective wellbeing. Drawing on these established links, ‘Potential Advantage’ explores whether students experience a forecasting error during the selection of a well-being activity, thereby choosing an activity which fits their personality, rather than a less ‘fitting’ and more uncomfortable choice which may be more beneficial for their mental health and well-being.

Participants will complete online personality, wellbeing and mental health questionnaires before and after involvement each academic term. The project will evaluate whether participants experienced changes in subjective wellbeing and mental health over time and the impact of their involvement in particular activities. Participants’ understanding of wellbeing, barriers/facilitators to engaging in wellbeing support and their experience of taking part in their chosen/allocated activity will be explored via one-to-one interviews.

This project seeks to make recommendations to support universities and students to manage wellbeing more effectively during the PhD journey.

Project website: [www.warwick.ac.uk/potentialadvantage](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/potentialadvantage)
Wellbeing When Writing: An Intervention Programme for Tackling Mental Health and Wellbeing Issues Arising from the Doctoral Writing Process

This project is based on the acknowledgment that the very process of writing doctoral research is often ignored as a key factor frequently causing debilitating anxiety and stress. The overall aim of this project is to support students in proactively tackling writing-related anxiety and stress and thus to improve confidence, resilience and a sense of wellbeing.

These aims will be achieved through:

- A series of workshops tailored to cohorts from each year of study and available to all doctoral students in the university.
- Writing retreats.
- Engaging supervisors throughout the project.

The project will be evaluated by measuring participating students’ experience of engaging in the programme, and the project results will be disseminated via an information pack for practitioners, conference presentations and a journal article.
THE VOICE OF THE POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

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www.ukcge.ac.uk
+44 (0)1543 308602

UK Council for Graduate Education.
Lichfield Centre,
The Friary,
Lichfield,
Staffordshire,
WS13 6QG.
UNITED KINGDOM.

UK REGISTERED CHARITY NO: 1061495.