MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING OF PGRs
PINCH POINTS & GOOD PRACTICE

A timeline of challenges to candidates’ wellbeing & good-practice support initiatives

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1. PRE-REGISTRATION

**PINCH POINTS / CHALLENGES**

**MANAGING EXPECTATIONS**

Choosing the right research group, supervisor & environment / expectations.
Setting out what doing a PhD actually entails.

**PERSONAL**

Disclosure at pre-registration is not common but could be helpful.
For international students, visa issues could be stressful.
Finding suitable accommodation.
Family/friends/caring responsibilities.

**COMMUNICATIONS**

Offers going out too close to start date.
Too many comms from too many different sources.
Conflicting/irrelevant information.

**SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE SOLUTIONS**

Effective matching & asking the right questions at interviews.
Talking to existing students as part of the interview process.
Preparation for the large jump in expectations.
Conversation with supervisors, post-offer but before start, re: expectations, support, needs.
At an institutional level - have a clear statement around expectations for the PhD.

Make disclosure a positive experience.
Buddy scheme to start during lead up to start of term, not just at the start of term.
Possibly involve support staff in the recruitment of new students - in particular those who may require support.
Have a named contact (e.g. admin/professional services) who can advise.
Include these issues in supervisor training.

Include pre-registration communication training within supervisor training.
Welcome email / letter from senior leadership perhaps containing a sentence about why the student was selected to add personal touch.
Pre-registration project - emerg.cunningham@ucd.ie
Project on pre-registration communication - networking / buddying - sarah.persaud@icr.ac.uk
Support staff to monitor/comment on communications with candidate.
Develop relationship with supervisor in comms.
Pre-arrival website specifically for PGRs.
## 2. EARLY STAGES

### PINCH POINTS / CHALLENGES

#### PERSONAL
- Transitioning from UG / Masters to research.
- Imposter syndrome.
- Needing to work alongside doing postgrad - financial pressures.
- Non-native students – understanding a new culture / traditions /being away from your family and friends / helping their families to adapt.
- Being away from family and friends also applies to native students.

#### SUPERVISION
- Developing an effective relationship with supervisor (s) and supervisory team – including industrial / external supervisors.
- Setting expectations for how the partnership will work - including industrial / external supervisors. Getting to know the supervisor.
- Fitting in with the existing culture / community / perhaps dealing with isolation.

#### RESEARCH PROJECT
- Setting expectations for the research project, including work-life balance and boundaries.
- Clarity on assessment milestones and passing assessment milestones – what to do if you don’t pass.
- Developing a research proposal / preparing for an early-stage assessment.
- Ethical approval and managing delays.

### SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE SOLUTIONS

#### PERSONAL
- Effective induction programme, including for international students.
- Follow-up to induction - perhaps drop in sessions, coffee mornings in the 3/4th week.
- Peer mentoring / buddy scheme and peer-to-peer support network.
- Social events to build the cohort - BBQs, Friday night socials.
- PGR specific provision, where appropriate.

#### SUPERVISION
- Clarity of roles and visibility of staff involved with pastoral care – departmental level and institutional level.
- Training for supervisors in pastoral care including reasonable expectations of research students with additional needs e.g. dyslexia.
- Effecting contracting with supervisor.
- Providing clarity around roles within supervisory teams.
- Exposure to key support staff as the norm, not taboo, key contacts important - informalise conversations by creating a community for PGR students.

#### RESEARCH PROJECT
- Share holiday, sickness, maternity/paternity policies.
- Talk candidate through actual thesis explaining the process to reach this point.
- Sign post relevant training courses e.g. project management training/academic writing.
## 3. MID-STAGES

### PINCH POINTS / CHALLENGES

#### PERSONAL

- Staying motivated, keeping momentum - no end in sight, 2nd year blues.
- Building resilience and dealing with negative results, shock at what other researchers have managed to achieve.
- Procrastination / perfectionism.
- Imposter syndrome and questioning the value of research project.
- Isolation.
- Career prospects - exposure via internships but do they cause stress later on?
- Work-life balance.

#### SUPERVISION

- Addressing challenges with the student supervisor partnership – who to talk to when things go wrong.
- Delays in receiving feedback from supervisors, receiving and acting upon constructive criticism.

#### RESEARCH PROJECT

- Understanding academics will challenge your research – nature of academia.
- Making the most of the wider research community, developing peer group networks.
- Time management.
- Juggling conferences / fieldwork / internships / placements / publications.
- Passing assessment milestones.
- Pressure to publish.
- Sometimes there will be a taught element of the research programme.

### SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE SOLUTIONS

- Regular promotion of student services – mindfulness / mediation / chaplaincy / counselling / disability support / Grad Schools/ coaching programmes / health and sports centres etc.
- Training for student services in working with postgraduates so that they understand the concept e.g. of working for a PhD.
- Specific workshops on resilience, motivation etc.
- Cohort building programmes - best practice in well-functioning cohorts.
- Regular departmental social events.
- Re-engagement event for 2nd years to reinforce support services.
- Guideline about a minimum holiday period to be taken.

- Support for supervisors around pastoral care and mental health awareness – including mental health first aid training.
- Training and support for supervisors on how to deliver effective feedback.

- ICR - maintaining momentum workshop.
- Sussex - thesis boot camp.
- Staff with pastoral roles take proactive rather than reactive role.
# 4. FINAL STAGES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PINCH POINTS / CHALLENGES</th>
<th>SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE SOLUTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PERSONAL</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial pressures – will individuals submit on time and within funding period - running out of money in general especially if haven’t completed research.</td>
<td>Regular opportunity to have discussions around careers, including where not in academia.</td>
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<td>What next – careers within / out of academia – transitioning out, deadline for job applications etc. general career anxiety.</td>
<td>Department should notify student in good time regarding end of finance and any support in place.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Void left by submission.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SUPERVISION</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Viva stress / Exam stress.</td>
<td>Students and supervisors to regularly discuss progress against finance available – part of milestones?</td>
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<td>Writing up stress.</td>
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<td>Corrections to thesis.</td>
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<td>Pressure to publish.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RESEARCH PROJECT</strong></td>
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<td>Specific support for exam / viva stress – e.g. mock viva.</td>
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<td>Requires ways of addressing culture around this.</td>
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<td>Website providing students with information on what to expect for the viva - perhaps workshops on viva, resource permitting, mock viva.</td>
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<td>Writing clubs, supporting students who need to make corrections.</td>
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<td>Thesis retreats.</td>
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<td>Clear assessment regulations.</td>
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<td>Sharing experiences with other students/peer mentoring.</td>
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