Researcher Mental Health and Wellbeing – Emerging Effective Practice from the Catalyst Projects

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Why studying for a PhD could be bad for your mental health

Academia is built on exploitation. We must break this vicious circle

What did I find when I joined a university? Poor mental health, huge workloads, ego-driven professors and rampant plagiarism

Student mental health and wellbeing – a step change in HE?

Universities struggle to offer crucial mental-health support to PhD students

European institutes report that their services are under strain and that they have issues with graduate-student engagement.

Fewer university students say they are happy and believe lives to be worthwhile, survey finds

‘It’s really no wonder that students are more unhappy than ever. Now is the time for universities to take responsibility’
Flanders study on performance and mental health in doctoral researchers

• 32% of doctoral researchers Flanders at risk of having or developing a common mental health disorder (especially depression and anxiety)

• Main determinants include:
  • Work-life conflict (-)
  • High job demands (-) and low job control (-)
  • Closed decision making (-)
  • Inspirational leadership (+)

• Also influential:
  • Doctoral phase – starting and finishing
  • Perception of the value of doctorate outside academia (+)
  • Academic career aspirations (+)
  • Gender (female -) and children (+)
Mental health and wellbeing in the UK PGR population: risk factors

- Imposter syndrome / perfectionism
- Supervision issues
- Finances and visas
- Isolation
- Workload and expectations
- Identity and role
- Personal circumstances
Catalyst Projects

- Funded through the Research England and Office for Students Catalyst Fund
- **17 projects** on the wellbeing and mental health of PhD researchers
- **Activities include:**
  - identifying needs
  - peer support and mentoring
  - training courses and other interventions
  - supervisory relationships
  - and links to NHS (National Health Service) support

Universities UK Mental Health framework

- **Whole institutional approach**
  - ‘Strong and strategic leadership, engagement of multiple constituencies and partners, and sustained prioritisation’

- **Framework elements**
  - Leadership
  - Data
  - Staff
  - Prevention
  - Early intervention
  - Support
  - Transitions
  - Partnership

- **Within the context of the researcher experience**
Catalyst outputs mapped to StepChange

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Prevention</th>
<th>Early Intervention</th>
<th>Support Services</th>
<th>Transitions</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
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[Table content with blue boxes indicating mapped outputs]
Emerging Effective Practice
Emerging learning from projects

Importance of commitment from senior management

• Becomes a priority across the institution
• Easier to achieve aims eg. survey participation
• Gives permission and time to engage
• Allows academic and professional services to work together effectively
• Particularly noticeable in larger projects
Challenges of PGR engagement

• Not a priority
• Particularly noticeable with wellbeing type activities
• Not seen as part of the culture of research
• Fear of admitting challenges or stress
• Need to understand the benefit for their research
• PGRS can be their own worst enemy
Emerging learning from projects

Attracting a diverse PGR population

- Some ethnic groups are less keen to engage than others
- Males less willing than females.
- Some academic departments appear less engaged than others
- Modes of study
- Volunteers eg. Mentors are more likely to be drawn from some ethnic groups
- Essential to consider the needs of all
Engagement with supervisors and staff

• Supervisors and staff must be on board
• Similar to the challenges of PGR engagement
• There are a number of reasons why they may not engage.
  • They may be scared of doing the wrong thing.
  • Need to ensure staff know what is in place to support them
• Emphasise that this is not an additional responsibility
Integrated Wellbeing

- Consider the pitch of activities to PGRs
- Importance of considering wellbeing before it becomes critical
- Acceptance that they will feel pressure and stress
- Embed within other activity eg. “How to finish your PhD on time”
Emerging learning from projects

Importance of co-creation

- PGRs want to be involved in the development of schemes to support them
- This helps with levels of engagement
- This should be carefully managed
- Clear briefs on what is achievable
Emerging learning from projects

Flexible and organic approaches to community and peer mentoring

• Many different approaches to this
• Organic format rather than top down overly structured programmes.
• Involvement of PGRs in process.
• Flexible location, timings etc.
• Long term and something to draw on as required
Institutional interventions

- **Strategy for whole institutional approach**
- **Culture of wellbeing from top down**
  - Senior leadership
  - Workload models and staff performance
  - Committing resources
  - Evaluating progress
- **Health literacy**
  - All staff and students
  - Particular attention to supervisors
- **Help seeking**
  - Creating a safe environment to raise concerns
  - Knowing when to ask for help
- **Appraisal and intervention**
  - Knowing when help is needed
  - Services targeted particularly for PGRs
Thank you

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