

What can universities do to support the well-being and mental health of postgraduate researchers?

As highlighted in a [recent LSE Impact blogpost](#), there is evidence to show that postgraduate researchers face particular risks in relation to poor mental health and well-being. Reporting on a recent review of interventions carried out by universities and higher education institutions, **David Watson**, outlines four areas in which universities can develop initiatives to support the well-being of postgraduate researchers.

Despite increased [attention](#) to student mental health in the media and within institutions, the wellbeing of postgraduate research (PGR) students remains an important issue. Often [overlooked](#), this particular cohort of students are at greater risk of mental health problems and as a whole, the PGR experience has been [normalised](#) as one that is expected or even supposed to be stressful. Although there is now a growing body of research and [evidence](#) that tells us how stressed PGR students are and many of the contributing factors are well known, we don't really have a good sense of what steps can be taken by universities and others to address these issues. Our [review](#) set out to address this gap by asking the question:

'What is the effectiveness of different interventions, practices and institutional arrangements in supporting PGR mental health?'

Systematic searches of academic databases identified only 21 studies that addressed this question, the evidence base being relatively small and weak. Most studies used qualitative or mixed methods to understand student experiences and the studies were typically cross-sectional not giving a sense of the effects of interventions over time. The popularity of qualitative methods is not surprising given the relatively small sample size of studies and practice-focussed nature of the evaluations, but this makes it hard to generalise from the review findings and identify the effectiveness of specific approaches. However, the review offers rich information about the kind of approaches that might work and processes influencing PGR wellbeing.



Areas of to support for improving PGR wellbeing

- 1) Evaluations of practices aimed at improving the working **relationship between PGR students and their supervisors** focussed on communication and relational quality. These studies identified increased confidence, *autonomy* as key wellbeing benefits and recognising the need for *emotional support* as part of the supervision process.
- 2) A number of studies evaluated programmes aimed at building **psychological or emotional resources**. They highlighted the need for PGRs to develop *confidence* and *resilience* to thrive and progress in a form of study that is highly independent and can be isolating. Targeted mental health support through counselling and behavioural approaches can reduce anxiety, stress and wellbeing problems, improving course retention. Students also looked to peers, friends and services outside university in building and maintaining psychological resources.
- 3) Developing a sense of academic identity, career progression and **personal and professional development** are all key parts of successful PGR study and wellbeing. Coaching or mentoring schemes can help students develop *competencies* and *problem solving* skills, providing a more neutral support space than a supervisory relationship. Mentoring schemes can also build a sense of community in facilitating social and emotional support, although peer mentoring can create a burden on some PGRs.
- 4) Developing PGR **community** is key to enable peer support, this can be achieved through shared working space, social events, group training programs and online platforms. The creation of community establishes mechanisms for sharing tacit knowledge and resources that can be useful in coping and succeeding in the PhD. Strong PGR community enables *problem solving* of issues related to PGR experience, access to *support* and *skill sharing*. Student led approaches can be successful, but they benefit if they have good institutional support.

Recommendations for universities to improve wellbeing

- Universities should facilitate the development of PGR community using a range of methods suited to specific contexts. Even if student led, some institutional support will be required, and opportunities for PGR students to meaningfully inform department or university wide initiatives should be considered. Virtual communities can be complementary.
- Provision of dedicated mental health support services are important, but interventions that facilitate personal development and build resilience are likely to be useful preventative strategies.
- Universities should understand what sources of online support PGR students access and use, and what may be most helpful. Online support and social media platforms can provide support, but are not comprehensive, and online spaces can potentially be negative for wellbeing.
- The supervisory relationship is important for PGR wellbeing. Institutions and individual departments should consider how to embed emotional support in supervisor training and the development and use of tools/strategies to manage and improve the supervisory relationship. This may necessitate additional support for supervisors and other staff.
- Peer support and mentoring is an important source of good mental health and professional development, but also demands resources and commitment from individuals and may require specialized knowledge/skills. The impact on all PGRs participating needs to be considered. Universities could consider facilitating peer support through professional development and training to encourage buy in from PGRs and others.

Whilst universities are beginning to attend to wellbeing more strategically and mindful of growing needs, PGRs are a group that can be overlooked and potentially at high risk of poor wellbeing. Thought also needs to be given to how potential barriers to implementing practices that support PGR wellbeing can be overcome at individual and institutional levels.

This blog post is based on the author's co-written article [Interventions, practices and institutional arrangements for supporting PGR mental health and wellbeing: Reviewing effectiveness and addressing barriers](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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