



supporting the mental health of postgraduate research students: review summary

FEB 2019 // DR DAVID WATSON & DR JOHN TURNPENNY
UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA





executive SUMMARY

an investigation into PGR mental health

Postgraduate research (PGR) students remain overlooked, despite increased interest and concern over student mental health. There is a growing body of research on PGR mental health, key factors influencing this, and initiatives to improve PGR wellbeing. However, little has been done to date to review these studies. The aim of this review was to summarize and synthesize existing research by asking the question:

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

A rapid systematic review methodology was applied in searching academic databases and key websites for relevant literature, through structured searches using key search terms. After screening the 844 papers initially identified, 16 were judged to be relevant to the review.

These 16 studies gathered data from 815 students, 33 staff members (mainly supervisors), and 7 recent PGR graduates. The majority of studies adopted a qualitative or mixed-methods approach. Only two took a purely quantitative approach to evaluation. The favouring of qualitative methods is not surprising given the relatively small sample size of studies and practice-focused nature of the evaluations. Evaluations were typically cross-sectional and often provided subjective accounts of the effectiveness of different mechanisms for supporting PGR wellbeing. It is therefore difficult to generalise from the findings of the review, or determine which approaches are particularly effective. However, the data captured are rich, and a range of approaches to supporting PGRs and processes influencing their wellbeing were apparent. Four distinct but overlapping types of approach were identified:

The structure and quality of the working relationship between PGR students and their supervisors was identified as a key causal factor influencing PGR wellbeing.

Evaluations of practices aimed at improving this relationship focused on communication and relational quality. These studies identified increased confidence and autonomy as key wellbeing benefits and recognising the need for emotional support as part of the supervision process.

The independent nature of PGR study can create isolation and presents challenges for self-motivation and self-management, highlighting the need for PGRs to develop resilience to thrive and progress.

A number of studies evaluated programmes aimed at building these psychological or emotional resources. They show that 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.

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 confidence and problem solving skills and provide a more neutral support space than a supervisory relationship. Mentoring schemes can also build a sense of community in particular cohorts or across the PGR community more generally facilitating social and emotional support. Although peer mentoring can create a burden on some PGRs, peer support was a common beneficial aspect of many interventions and practices included in the review.

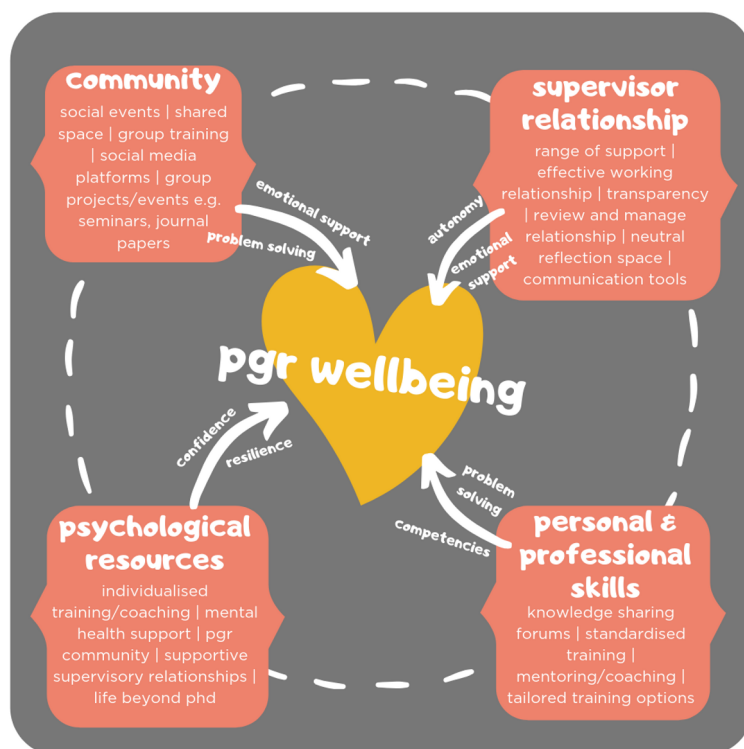
Developing the PGR community in institutions is key to enable peer support.

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. Student led approaches can be successful, but they benefit if they have good institutional support. More structured training or skills development programmes can also build community, develop confidence and academic voice. These are crucial in establishing competencies that allow PGR students to attain key milestones during study.



The diagram proposes a conceptual model that maps these four types of approach according to key factors in supporting PGR wellbeing:

Many of the approaches are not necessarily explicitly about addressing wellbeing problems, but are actions which are good institutional practice anyway. They are likely to support timelier thesis submission rates, fewer withdrawals, and better academic outcomes as well as reducing wellbeing problems.



recommendations

Universities should facilitate the development of PGR community using a range of methods suited to specific contexts, which may include cohort training programmes and student led initiatives. Even if student led, some institutional support will be required. Opportunities for PGR students to meaningfully inform department or university wide initiatives need to be considered. Virtual communities can be complementary and connect PGRs at a broader level.

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.

Online support and social media platforms can provide support, but are not comprehensive, and online spaces can potentially be negative for wellbeing. Awareness of online support may be limited and trusted public health services may be preferred. Universities should make efforts to understand what sources of online support PGR students access and use.

The supervisory relationship is important for PGR wellbeing. Institutions 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 specialised knowledge/skills. They can in some cases create a burden on mentors. The impact on all PGRs participating needs to be considered. Universities could consider facilitating peer support through professional development and training.

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The full review is available from the lead author – Dr David Watson at david.watson@uea.ac.uk