

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING OF PGRs PINCH POINTS & GOOD PRACTICE

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

Laura **Lane**. Dr Katryna **Kalawsky**. Victoria **Sinclair**. Dr Mikel **Mellick**

UK Council for
Graduate Education

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 - emer.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

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.

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.

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

PINCH POINTS / CHALLENGES

PERSONAL

Financial pressures – will individuals submit on time and within funding period - running out of money in general especially if haven't completed research.

What next – careers within / out of academia – transitioning out, deadline for job applications etc. general career anxiety.

Void left by submission.

SUPERVISION

RESEARCH PROJECT

Viva stress / Exam stress.

Writing up stress.

Corrections to thesis.

Pressure to publish.

SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE SOLUTIONS

Regular opportunity to have discussions around careers, including where not in academia.

Department should notify student in good time regarding end of finance and any support in place.

Students and supervisors to regularly discuss progress against finance available – part of milestones?

Specific support for exam / viva stress – e.g. mock viva.

Requires ways of addressing culture around this.

Website providing students with information on what to expect for the viva - perhaps workshops on viva, resource permitting, mock viva.

Writing clubs, supporting students who need to make corrections.

Thesis retreats.

Clear assessment regulations.

Sharing experiences with other students/peer mentoring.

UK Council for
Graduate Education

THE VOICE OF THE **POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION COMMUNITY**

The UK Council for Graduate Education is a vibrant and engaged membership community of higher education institutions committed to excellence in postgraduate education.

A registered charity and not-for-profit organisation, we champion and enhance postgraduate education through world-class learning and professional development events, sharing best-practice developments and peer-to-peer learning opportunities, commissioning cutting-edge research, and making policy recommendations to promote a strong and sustainable postgraduate sector.

To find out how we can help you:

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

UK Council for Graduate Education

Lichfield Centre
The Friary
Lichfield
Staffordshire
WS13 6QG
UK

Registered Charity No. 1061495