**Researcher Wellbeing and Mental Health**

**Why is it important?**
There has been increased interest in the wellbeing and mental health of students in higher education, particularly of undergraduates. Less attention has been paid to the wellbeing and mental health of doctoral researchers and even less to how these issues affect research staff.

To produce world-class research, we must provide a healthy and supportive research environment that allows researchers to flourish.

Recent evidence does not paint a positive picture of wellbeing and mental health in the research environment. A 2017 literature review for the Royal Society and the Wellcome Trust, for example, found that HE staff report high stress levels and lower wellbeing than staff in other sectors. In the Times Higher Education’s (THE) recent survey of 6,439 academics, 55% reported experiencing depression, anxiety or other mental health problems related to stress. Prof Katia Leveque’s 2017 study on the mental health of doctoral researchers in Flanders identified that 32% ‘are at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, especially depression’.

In the UK, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2017 included new questions about wellbeing and retention.

Although more than 60% of doctoral researchers were satisfied with their work-life balance, and 85% felt their degree programme was worthwhile, 26% of respondents had considered leaving or suspending their degree programme.

Initial analysis indicates that this may be partly linked to the research culture. Doctoral researchers with a disability, or a mental health condition, are more likely to have considered leaving or suspending their studies (48% and 60%, respectively).

The evidence we have suggests doctoral degrees are stressful, and doctoral researchers are potentially at higher risk of developing a mental health condition than undergraduates. Not only can poor wellbeing and mental health have a devastating impact on individuals, they have the potential to affect researcher engagement, progression and retention, and can disrupt the training and development of the new generation of researchers.
**POPULATIONS MOST AT RISK**

**Internationally mobile researchers**, for whom challenges may include adjusting to a new culture, finance, visas, (potentially) working in a non-native language, and less access to family and friend support.

**Isolated researchers**, including those undertaking fieldwork and at remote campuses.

**Part-time researchers**, who may struggle with work-life balance and financial issues, and may also feel isolated.

**Researchers with disabilities**, are more likely to experience mental health issues and need student support tailored for the research environment.

**Researchers with family or caring responsibilities** can struggle with their work-life balance.

*From interviews with doctoral researchers, although it is likely that researchers at all career stages may experience these risks.

**EXPLORING WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH AND ASSOCIATED SERVICES FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHERS REPORT**

In the first study of its kind in the UK, (then) Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned Vitae, with Katia Leveque, Professor of Industrial Relations at Ghent University and the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to explore wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers (PGRs).

In the study, researchers consistently described the doctoral degree as a stressful experience. Further, because postgraduate researchers (PGRs) don’t identify as students, though they are registered students they tend to miss messages about student wellbeing and associated services. Even within cohort-based doctoral training programmes, PGRs will be working on individual projects and reporting to a specific supervisor/supervisory team and the quality of this relationship is critical to their wellbeing.

In the study doctoral researchers reported that they were aware that academics were also experiencing high levels of stress and were likely to take the culture within their department or group as more indicative of the institutional attitude to the wellbeing of staff and students than the central institutional messages they receive.

You can read the full report at: https://re.ukri.org/documents/2018/mental-health-report/

**WHAT CAN INSTITUTIONS DO?**

- Have a researcher wellbeing and mental health strategy
- Invest in wellbeing and mental health support and resources targeted to specific research career stages
- Integrate wellbeing and mental health support into researcher development
- Support both parties to manage the supervisory relationship
- Provide mental health literacy training to all
- Ensure researchers know when and where to ask for help and feel safe doing so
- Provide targeted support to at-risk populations
- Support all those who are engaged in research, not just those employed on research contracts
- Monitor researcher wellbeing and mental health and evaluate progress

*Recommendations from Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers (Case study participant, 2018)

"Staff and PGRs highlighted difficulties in the supervisory relationship as a common cause of wellbeing issues for PGRs"

(Case Study Participant, 2018)

"My university has been very supportive since I disclosed my condition. I had not realised the support that was available until I did so”

(Case study participant, 2018)
What next for Vitae?

Vitae will continue to engage with the sector on this pressing issue, both through specific projects, and by inviting international discussion and practice-sharing.

CATALYST FUND EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

The Office for Students (OfS) has provided £1.5M funding, through the Catalyst Fund, for 17 projects on the wellbeing and mental health of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) in England. These projects cover a wide range of activities and areas, including: identifying needs, peer support and mentoring, training courses and other interventions, supervisory relationships, and links to National Health Service support.

To ensure wider benefits from the good practice, we are working with institutions to share learning across projects and with the sector. This evaluation and dissemination, in partnership with Universities UK (UUK), will use the UUK Framework for Mental Health and a validated good practice exchange platform. The Framework’s whole university approach links the health of the research environment to a top-down culture of wellbeing that encourages health literacy, help-seeking behaviours, appraisal and intervention.

VITAE IS COLLABORATING ON FOUR CATALYST FUND PROJECTS WITH OUR MEMBER INSTITUTIONS

University of Manchester
Partnerships for improved postgraduate researcher wellbeing and mental health. The project will encourage PGRs’ participation in and engagement with wellbeing activities, develop training and resources that are tailored for PGRs and their supervisors, and improve links to local NHS providers.

University of Portsmouth
Improving PGRs wellbeing by increasing mental health literacy and social support. This project will develop mental health literacy resources to underpin enhanced induction for PGRs and training for relevant staff, and establish mentoring circles to increase resilience amongst the PGR community.

University of Sussex
Supporting mental health and wellbeing for PGRs. The project will deliver research (a systematic literature review and a mixed methods exploration of PGR mental health) to develop training and early intervention to support PGR mental health and improve liaison with NHS services.

University of Westminster
Wellbeing when Writing: an intervention programme for tackling mental health and wellbeing issues arising from the doctoral writing process. A workshop series will support PGRs to proactively tackle their writing-related anxiety and stress and improve their reflectivity, confidence, resilience and sense of wellbeing.

Opportunities to Engage

CONCORDAT REVIEW

The independent review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, the resulting consultation and sector activities, provide an opportunity to reflect on how the research culture is impacting on the wellbeing and mental health of research staff, and the role of the Concordat in affecting positive change. We will be considering how the importance of supporting the wellbeing and mental health of researchers is integrated into the revised Concordat as highlighted in the review report.

A sector consultation to encourage responses to the review recommendations and the revised Concordat principles was launched at the Vitae Researcher Development International Conference 2018.
For more information on the wellbeing and mental health of researchers, take a look at our new web pages at: www.vitae.ac.uk/wellbeing-and-mental-health.

Our dedicated web pages contain advice, resources and include links to the following ‘useful reading’ documents below.

**For more information on the wellbeing and mental health of researchers, take a look at our new web pages at: www.vitae.ac.uk/wellbeing-and-mental-health.**

**Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers** (Vitae, 2018)

**Every Researcher Counts: equality and diversity in researcher careers** (Vitae, 2016) Resources to improve understanding of equality and diversity in higher education.

**One size does not fit all**

Arts and Humanities doctoral and early career researchers’ professional development survey (Vitae, 2017)

**Preparing Researchers for an Unknown Future: Cultures, Behaviours and Mindsets** (Vitae, 2018) post-event blog

**The UK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers** is an agreement between funders and employers of research staff to improve the employment and support for researchers and research careers in UK higher education

**Review of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers**

Concordat Strategy Group (CSG)


**Staying positive during your doctorate** (Vitae, website)

**OTHER RESOURCES**

**Thriving at Work:** The Stevenson/Falmer review of mental health and employers

**Understanding mental health in the research environment** (Prepared for Royal Society and Wellcome Trust by RAND Europe, 2017)

**Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students** (Katia Levecque et al, Research Policy, 46, 2017)

**Mental Health in Higher Education Framework** (Universities UK (UUK), #StepChange)

**Understanding adjustments: supporting staff and students who are experiencing mental health difficulties** (Equality Challenge Unit, 2015)

**What works wellbeing** UUK’s wellbeing in higher education web platform

**Student minds** mental health charter development

**Student Mental Health: The Role and Experiences of Academics** (Student minds; University of Derby; Kings College London, January 2018)

**The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)** (HEA, 2017)

**Early-career researchers and mental health** (Eurodoc, Impact, 2018:2)

**Work and wellbeing in academic employees: an evidence based approach** (Kinman, G. & Wray, S., Palgrave, forthcoming 2018)

**Half of UK Academics suffer stress-linked mental health problems** (Times Higher Education, 12 July 2018)

**Feeling overwhelmed by academia? You are not alone** (Nature, May 2018)

**RESEARCHER WELLBEING COMMUNITY**

Join the wellbeing group on the Vitae Community. You can reach this from the Vitae website: www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-community or contact: website@vitae.ac.uk

Vitae and its membership programme are managed by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited, an independent registered charity.

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