

the **mental health** and **wellbeing** of postgraduate researchers

Briefing for professional services staff supporting PGRs

The Universities UK (UUK) Stepchange framework stresses the importance of taking a whole university approach to creating 'Mentally Healthy Universities' and there is strong evidence that good mental health has a positive impact on a person's learning, creativity, ability to concentrate and overall performance levels. This is equally important in supporting the mental health of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as research shows that PGRs are more at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder, such as anxiety, than the general population (Levecque 2017).

Professional services staff have important roles to play in supporting researchers' wellbeing and mental health. Some, such as student support services and counselling services, have direct responsibility through signposting to relevant support, early intervention and encouraging healthy behaviours. However, staff in other roles, such as graduate school staff, departmental administrators and technicians, will also interact with researchers regarding their wellbeing and mental health. Staff should feel comfortable talking about wellbeing, be aware of available support and know their own boundaries. This briefing presents ways in which professional services staff can make a difference.

Encouraging peer support

Peer support may be effective in reducing feelings of isolation and sharing experiences of the challenges that may come during doctoral study.

Graduate school staff and researcher developers, particularly, should consider how they can develop and sustain PGR networks, which engage the wide range of PGR communities.

Understanding the distinct nature of PGRs' experiences and challenges

The PGR population may be considerably smaller than other student groups and can be much less visible, especially to student services staff. They may not relate to the wider student population and can feel that they fall between student and staff.

The nature of doctoral study is that PGRs can suffer from feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome. Workload expectations, supervisory relationships, lacking a sense of belonging, finances and visa concerns can all cause feelings of anxiety.

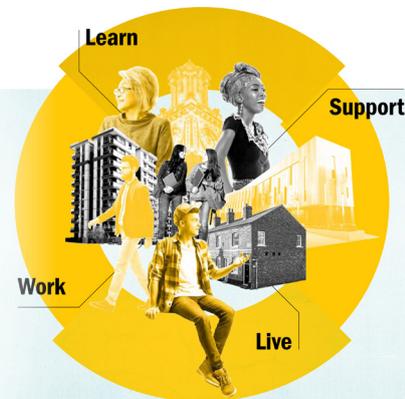
PGRs that are most at risk are part-time researchers, international researchers, those working remotely, those with caring responsibilities or those with disabilities.

(Vitae 2018)

Signposting PGRs to appropriate support

Staff who interact with PGRs need to be familiar with the existing institutional support and guidance available to them. Staff should not feel that they have to be experts to support PGRs but should feel comfortable that they can direct them to appropriate support, such as wellbeing activities or how to access counselling services.

All interventions and training must be flexible in the timing, duration and types offered in order to provide an inclusive programme that attracts the widest engagement from PGRs.



Mentally Healthy Universities

Everyone has a role to play

Professional services staff who interact with PGRs can influence their wellbeing, even if they do not have direct responsibility for this. It could be a departmental administrator or technician who spots warning signs or unhealthy behaviours. A national survey by the University of Liverpool revealed that 60% of technicians had supported a postgraduate researcher or undergraduate student with a mental health issue.

All staff need to be aware of the signs of poor mental health and confident in knowing whether and how to intervene, and their appropriate responsibilities and limitations. It is also important that staff understand their own mental health and display healthy behaviours so as to contribute to a healthy institutional culture.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- **Universities UK Stepchange Mental Health Framework**
- **Student Minds Mental Health Charter**
- **Catalyst Fund resources**
- **Five steps to mental wellbeing**
- **Charlie Waller Memorial Trust Keeping mental health in mind: free online learning for all university staff**
- **Guidance for universities on preventing student suicides**
- **Technicians: Providing frontline and vital support for mental health and wellbeing**
- **Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for PGRs, Vitae, 2018**
- **PGR Connect – Video of PGRs discussing the benefits of being part of a support network**

This briefing was developed as part of the evaluation of the Catalyst Fund: Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs.

£1.5M was awarded to seventeen projects by the Office for Students and Research England, UKRI. More information on the individual projects and the full project report can be found here.



Vitae in partnership with Universities UK were commissioned to evaluate and identify the outcomes from the programme and share good practice. The resulting evaluation report and programme resources can be found here.

