Guest editorial

Considering mental health and wellbeing in postgraduate research: a critical reflection

The First International Conference on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers was held in Brighton, UK, in May 2019. Attended by 195 delegates from 97 institutions in 11 countries, the conference included six keynote lectures and 55 other sessions that shared research findings and good practice initiatives from across the higher education sector. The level of engagement with the conference highlighted the extent to which mental health and well-being of postgraduate researchers (PGRs) has become a key concern for universities. This special issue on *mental health and well-being in postgraduate research* was inspired by the enthusiasm the conference revealed for reflection, discussion and engagement on the topic and sought to bring together a range of diverse disciplinary perspectives to explore issues relating to mental health and well-being in graduate and postdoctoral education. However, as it transpired, the compilation and publication of this special issue has coincided with a global pandemic in which mental health and well-being has become a central concern for all of us.

The impact of COVID-19 has been extensive, affecting national economies as well as public health and drastically altering the everyday lives of citizens of countries across the world. The effects of the pandemic on those participating in higher education have been significant, with students at all levels of study experiencing university in a dramatically different context to that before 2020. National restrictions and lockdowns, government interventions and campus closures have all shaped the student experience, with teaching, learning and social activity taking place largely online. There have been significant challenges for PGRs and supervisors during this period, including restricted access to technology and research facilities, disruption to planned research activities and negotiating boundaries between work and domestic responsibilities. The negative impact of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of individuals of PGRs and early career academics has been profound (Creaton, 2021; Levine and Rathmell, 2020; Woolston, 2020). Those working in disciplines where research requires access to laboratories, specialist equipment or engaging in specific forms of fieldwork have been particularly affected. For PGRs, the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the impact on their ability to successfully complete their research within their funding period have been particularly significant, given that even prior to the pandemic, funding pressures were found to be a factor that could contribute to poor mental health and well-being among PGRs (Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; Metcalfe *et al.*, 2018).

This special issue comprises nine articles that address some of the key issues in PGR's mental health and well-being. It is now widely recognised that PGRs as a population are more likely than other types of students, and more likely than the general population, to experience poor mental health and well-being (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Williams, 2019; Woolston, 2019). Research by Levecque (2017) indicated that half of PhD students in a Belgian study experienced psychological distress and one in three were at risk of common psychiatric disorders, and a number of subsequent studies have confirmed the susceptibility of doctoral

students to mental health and well-being issues (Hazell *et al.*, 2020). However, despite the growing evidence accumulating through this international survey data, several key papers and reports over the last decade have highlighted the lack of understanding of the extent and nature of mental health and well-being issues among PGRs (Guthrie *et al.*, 2017; Juniper *et al.*, 2012). This special issue, which brings together contributions from the UK, Canada and the USA, addresses some of these knowledge gaps, generating new understandings of the extent, scope and nature of mental health and well-being issues across PGR populations.

Four of the articles in this special issue report on a series of interventions undertaken in the UK between 2018 and 2020. A report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council of England concluded that the specific challenges faced by PGRs required a bespoke policy response and that higher education institutions needed to invest more resources in student support services and associated activities to meet expected PGR demand (Metcalfe *et al.*, 2018). Research England and the Office for Students subsequently provided funding for a range of initiatives from the UK universities, which aimed to develop and enhance activities focussed on improving PGRs' mental health and well-being. Crook *et al.*'s article, based on one of these projects, explores PGR's well-being and help-seeking from the perspectives of students and academic and professional services staff. In it, they report on the nature and extent of depression, anxiety and well-being among PGRs, factors that impact PGR well-being and factors that influence help-seeking. Reflecting on another Catalyst-funded project, Berry *et al.* draw on the findings from a UK wide survey of PGRs to examine the relationship between mental health-related stigma and discrimination and absenteeism and presenteeism. Further, Panayidou and Priest and Homer *et al.* report on the outcomes and implications of two interventions to support postgraduate institutions. Panayidou and Priest's paper examines the effectiveness of co-facilitated PhD support groups as an intervention to improve mental well-being and increases confidence in timely PhD completion. Homer *et al.*'s contribution evaluates the Researcher Toolkit, a novel PGR well-being initiative aimed at empowering PGRs and promoting positive research culture. These projects have highlighted the benefits of universities tailoring mental health support specifically to PGRs and drawn attention to the critical role of supervisors in supporting PGRs' mental health and well-being. A detailed evaluation of the impact of these four projects and the other 13 initiatives has fed into recommendations for senior institutional leaders, students, supervisors, professional services and for the wider higher education and research sector (Metcalfe *et al.*, 2020).

Yet understanding the extent of mental health and well-being issues among PGR populations, and finding appropriate ways to provide support these individuals, relies upon institutions being able to identify those who may be struggling. Though rates of disclosure of mental health issues among PGRs appear to be increasing, reporting remains low in comparison to the wider population (Levecque *et al.*, 2017; Metcalfe *et al.*, 2020). Within this special issue, Homer *et al.*'s paper on peer support highlights the stigma attached to seeking help with well-being, indicating how disclosing mental health conditions may be seen as "risky" and echoing wider concerns about how stigma affects the disclosure of disabilities within academia more broadly (Careers Research and Advisory Centre [CRAC], 2020). Further, in Morris' paper exploring the impact of UK PGRs' sense of belonging on their well-being, it is evident that there is a strong link between well-being and academic practices and culture. Her findings indicate that the uncertain status of PGRs within their academic communities often leads to feelings of isolation, preventing a sense of belonging and identification with other scholars, contributing to poor mental health and well-being.

Although the structure of doctoral study differs across jurisdictions, a number of common themes can be identified, particularly in relation to the wider institutional and

structural factors which impact upon doctoral study. This special issue also contains perspectives on mental health and well-being from Canada and the USA, all of which draw attention to the impact of academic disciplines on individuals' mental health. For example, Posselt draws on a sample of 20,888 students from 69 US universities to provide the first multi-institutional, multidisciplinary analysis of graduate and professional students' mental health in the USA. She explores the prevalence of depression and anxiety and its association with discrimination, competitiveness and support across different disciplines, highlighting how the distinct socialisation processes within different disciplinary cultures may manifest themselves in varying patterns of mental health. Oddone *et al.* focus on four disciplines – education, medicine, nursing and social work – to explore how engagement in formal and informal peer mentorship impacts the social connectedness and well-being of graduate students. Gonzalez *et al.*'s study hypothesises that disciplinary identity – the perception of belonging to an academic discipline – and well-being are correlated and develop in similar directions of the course of a doctorate. Drawing on data from a longitudinal study of PhD students enrolled at a large research-intensive US university, this paper finds that students' mental health and disciplinary identity do follow similar trajectories, generally declining during the first years of doctoral study. However, the path of these trajectories is shaped by students' backgrounds and levels of stress, psychological needs satisfaction, anticipatory socialisation experiences and prior academic success.

These articles draw on a range of perspectives from students, supervisors, professional staff and from the implementers themselves. The perspective of the students is, of course, paramount in understanding and addressing issues relating to mental health and well-being. The views of thousands of postgraduate research students are represented here both through large-scale surveys, as well as rich and detailed responses to questionnaires and interview questions. The student voice is particularly evident in Morris' paper based on two qualitative studies, one of which adopted a phenomenological approach, exploring the complexities of lived experiences through in-depth narrative interviews and written reflections. Through an analysis of these perspectives, Morris illuminates how belonging is experienced by postgraduate learners and how this relates to their well-being, engagement and progression. A number of authors identify strategies and tactics for improving mental health and well-being which draw on the support of other students, evaluating interventions such as the development of peer support groups for PGRs (Panayidou and Priest) and PGR-led workshops (Homer *et al.*). Indeed, the positive impact of peer-led initiatives and activities that include peer support appear to be significant, as seen in Oddone *et al.*'s paper on peer mentorship. Students were also involved in planning, developing and evaluation some of the projects described in these articles, actively engaging other PGRs in the design and delivery of interventions. Homer *et al.*, for example, describes how PGRs participated in the development, evaluation and revision of training materials, delivered peer support workshops and trained other workshop leaders. Similarly, Crook *et al.* engaged a consultative forum of PGRs from a wide spectrum of disciplines in developing, piloting and refining study materials and plans. Co-production can clearly add value in enhancing the relevance and the effectiveness of interventions, although Valeix *et al.* note the importance of maintaining PGR influence in longer term policy and decision-making in universities beyond the end of time-limited projects. They propose PGR-facing panels supported by participatory research frameworks to promote ongoing engagement and sustainability.

A further aim of this special issue was to investigate the role of supervisors and other academic and professional staff in promoting and supporting mental health. Previous research studies have highlighted the crucial role of the supervisor in relation to PGR mental health and well-being (Hazell *et al.*, 2020; Levecque *et al.*, 2017). However, Crook *et al.* also

highlight the role of professional staff in providing support to PGRs, including programme administrators and staff from careers, the library, counselling, the Students' Union and the chaplaincy. These student-facing staff are key figures in the engagement with PGRs and critical to successful institutional interventions. Another perspective which is rarely heard is that of those who are involved in the implementation of the interventions to support PGRs. Valeix *et al.* address this gap through their paper, which draws on reflexive, auto-ethnographic insights from three women involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of mental health and well-being projects. Professional staff and implementers are often overlooked in analyses of PGR mental health and well-being, yet as Valeix *et al.* observe, the perspectives of these "wellbeing workers" are key in understanding how and why interventions aimed at improving PGR mental health and well-being may, or may not, be successful. Being able to identify the types of activities and interventions which are most likely to succeed in different academic contexts is vitally important if we are to ensure that funded initiatives improve the experiences of those at whom they are aimed. Insights from these papers in this special issue are therefore crucial in helping to advance our understanding of how to improve PGR mental health and well-being in practice.

Although PGRs face particular challenges which may contribute to poor mental health and well-being, such as financial pressures, isolation and uncertain status within academic hierarchies, few studies have investigated the differential impact of these and other factors on individuals from marginalised groups. Indeed, the recent evaluation of the Research England/Office for Students–funded projects (Metcalfe *et al.*, 2020) highlights the lack of research investigating how doctoral study impacts the mental health and well-being of PGRs with protected characteristics. However, there is evidence to suggest that part-time, disabled, international, Black and minority ethnic and female PGRs struggle more with isolation, discrimination and balancing multiple responsibilities during their studies, all factors which have negative implications for individuals' well-being (De Welde and Laursen, 2011; Gardner and Gopaul, 2012; Handforth, 2021; Hannam-Swain, 2018; Juniper *et al.*, 2012; Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer, 2016; Walsh, 2010). A sense of identity and belonging is also shaped through gendered, classed, racialised and ableised positionalities, and some of these papers highlight areas where reflection on the need for more inclusive and equitable academic cultures and practices more broadly. For example, Gonzalez uses a longitudinal approach to map US PGRs' well-being trajectories during the doctorate, highlighting that those with pre-existing mental health conditions have less positive outcomes, and that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, women and minority ethnic PGRs are more likely to experience a significant decline in their mental health. Further, Posselt's paper "Discrimination, Competitiveness, and Support in US Graduate Student Mental Health" highlights the prevalence of, and risk factors associated with, anxiety and depression among PGRs in the USA, which include experiencing racial discrimination, financial concerns and being based in arts and humanities disciplines. COVID-19 has had a disproportionately negative impact on particular groups, highlighting and reinforcing existing inequalities within the academy (Brown *et al.*, 2020; Wright *et al.*, 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

The aim of this special issue was to bring together a range of diverse disciplinary perspectives to explore issues relating to mental health and well-being in graduate and postdoctoral education to address gaps in the current published academic literature. These included national and institutional policy initiatives, international and comparative policy approaches, evaluation of interventions, transitions between undergraduate/postgraduate taught and postgraduate research, supervisor pedagogy and peer support. The specific aims of the special issue in relation to teaching, practice and research were to present and discuss research findings relating to the mental health

and well-being of PGRs; to evaluate interventions aimed at increasing the mental health and well-being of PGRs; to investigate the role of supervisors and other academic and professional staff in promoting and supporting mental health; to identify strategies and tactics for improving institutional approaches for improving mental health and well-being; and to consider the wider relationship between PGR's mental health and well-being and academic practices and culture. The nine papers in this special issue have met these aims through presenting findings from a range of empirical research studies, evidence-based critiques of practice and from a diverse range of theoretical, conceptual and disciplinary perspectives. We are delighted with the contribution that they have made to ongoing discussions and debates on mental health and well-being through advancing theory, evaluating practice and making recommendations for change. The publication of this special issue coincides with the preparation for the Second International Conference on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers, now taking place online in May 2021. The theme of the conference – how to create mentally healthy research communities – has taken on a new level of significance in the context of COVID-19.

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