Wellbeing of postgraduate researchers in the UK

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Head, Vitae

ACGR Mental Health Forum, 30 September 2019

Education

Why studying for a PhD could be bad for your mental health

Academia is built on exploitation. We must break this vicious circle

What did I find when I joined a university? Poor mental health, huge workloads, ego-driven professors and rampant plagiarism

News > Education > Education News

Fewer university students say they are happy and believe lives to be worthwhile, survey finds

'It's really no wonder that students are more unhappy than ever. Now is the time for universities to take responsibility'

Eleanor Busby Education Correspondent |
Thursday 7 June 2018 00:19 | 284 shares |

Previous post	Next post
Some science and some serendipity	Why learning to mentor and teach is more important for US faculty members

NATUREJOBS | NATUREJOBS BLOG

Universities struggle to offer crucial mental-health support to PhD students

31 May 2018 | 18:12 GMT | Posted by Karen Kaplan | Category: Academia, Career paths, Diversity, PhD

European institutes report that their services are under strain and that they have issues with graduate-student engagement.

MENTAL HEALTH

UB
MENU

Student mental health and wellbeing – a step change in HE?

VWV's Kris Robbetts looks at the reasons why mental health has become such an important issue and what is being done to address it

RELATED STORIES

Universities must collaborate on mental health
We need more cohesion, says Kevin Rogers, as he examines how and why universities should be responding to the mental health agenda

Why the biggest cyber threat facing universities may come from within
With the higher education sector often considered a soft target by cyber criminals, data breaches are on the rise, says Varonis' Andy Richmond

Student bed boost puts UK on the HE map for 2019
Dan Baker, general manager, EMEA at Student.com examines key student accommodation trends

---

Professional supplements

Wellbeing at university: why support is a priority

Expectations and big debts can weigh heavily on students' shoulders - but counselling and other facilities are commonplace

Wellbeing of postgraduate researchers

- Exploring the wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers, 2018

  https://re.ukri.org/news-events-publications/publications/postgraduate-researchers-mental-health-and-wellbeing-report/

- Universities UK 'Step Change' framework for mental health

  https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange

- Evaluation of the postgraduate researcher wellbeing and mental health Catalyst Fund programme

  https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/student-safety-and-wellbeing/what-are-we-doing/

Understanding the mental health and wellbeing in the UK PGR population: risk factors

- Imposter syndrome / perfectionism
- Supervision issues

- Finances and visas
- Isolation

- Workload and expectations
- Identity and role
- Personal circumstances

https://re.ukri.org/news-events-publications/publications/postgraduate-researchers-mental-health-and-wellbeing-report/

Challenges in supporting PGR wellbeing

- ■ **Low disclosure rates to institution**
  - ■ Sharing information with supervisors and other stakeholders

- ■ **Identifying potential problems early**
  - ■ Knowing when to seek advice / help (PGR and supervisors)
  - ■ Not wanting to put pressure on services with high UG demand
  - ■ Presenting with specific practical issues

- ■ **Knowing what is available**

- ■ **Not relating to Student Services**
  - ■ Falling between student and staff

- ■ **Not engaging with wider institutional culture and communities**

Step Change: Mental Health framework

- **Whole institutional approach**
  - 'Strong and strategic leadership, engagement of multiple constituencies and partners, and sustained prioritisation'

- **Framework elements**
  - Leadership
  - Data
  - Staff
  - Prevention
  - Early intervention
  - Support
  - Transitions
  - Partnership

- **Within the context of the researcher experience**

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPELLING CASE

IDENTIFY CURRENT NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MEASURE OUTCOMES

WHOLE ORGANISATION

REVIEW CURRENT PRACTICE

IDENTIFY PRIORITIES

DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange

Institutional interventions

- **Strategy for whole institutional approach (Universities UK framework)**

- **Culture of wellbeing from top down**
  - Senior leadership
  - Workload models and staff performance
  - Committing resources
  - Evaluating progress

- **Health literacy - prevention**
  - All staff and students
  - Particular attention to supervisors

- **Help seeking – early intervention**
  - Creating a safe environment to raise concerns
  - Knowing when to ask for help

- **Appraisal and intervention**
  - Knowing when help is needed
  - Services targeted particularly for PGRs

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPELLING CASE

IDENTIFY CURRENT NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MEASURE OUTCOMES

WHOLE ORGANISATION

REVIEW CURRENT PRACTICE

IDENTIFY PRIORITIES

DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC PLAN

Catalyst Projects

- Funded through the Research England and Office for Students Catalyst Fund

- **17 projects** on the wellbeing and mental health of PhD researchers

- **Activities include:**
  - identifying needs
  - peer support and mentoring
  - training courses and other interventions
  - supervisory relationships
  - and links to NHS (National Health Service) support

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/student-safety-and-wellbeing/what-are-we-doing/

Catalyst outputs mapped to StepChange

Leadership	Data	Staff	Prevention	Early Intervention	Support Services	Transitions	Partnership
	■		■	■	■	■	
	■		■	■		■	
			■				
	■	■	■	■		■	
■	■	■	■	■		■	■
	■	■	■	■	■	■	
■	■	■	■	■	■		
■		■	■	■	■		
■	■	■	■	■			■
	■		■	■			
	■		■	■			
		■	■	■	■		
■	■	■	■	■		■	
			■	■		■	
■		■	■	■		■	
			■	■			
			■				
■	■	■	■				

Emerging learning from Catalyst projects

- Importance of commitment from senior management
- Challenges of PGR engagement
- Attracting a diverse PGR population
- Wellbeing by stealth
- Importance of co-creation
- Engagement with supervisors and staff
- Flexible and organic approaches to community and peer mentoring

Thank you

Tel: **+44 (0) 1223 460277**

Email: **Janet.metcalfe@vitae.ac.uk**

Website: **www.vitae.ac.uk**

          @vitae_news