

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

Briefing for senior institutional leaders

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 poor mental health than the general population (Levecque 2017).

Postgraduate research can be seen as a microcosm of university life, bridging research, teaching, personal and professional development, regulation and community-building, and requiring institutional-wide engagement and systemic and cultural improvements. Poor PGR mental health can have a devastating impact on individuals, families, friends and university communities. It may lead to increased study suspensions, fewer completions, and disrupted research outputs. This briefing presents ways in which senior leaders can provide strategic leadership in relation to the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs.

Make PGR mental health and wellbeing a key priority in your institutional strategy

Delivering effective support for the mental health and wellbeing of PGRs requires the engagement of all parts of an institution. Institutional leaders need to provide the strategic direction to ensure an integrated approach across the institution that is embedded in policies, procedures and day-to-day practices.

Acknowledge PGRs as a distinct population in institutional mental health strategies

It is important that institutional mental health strategies acknowledge PGRs as a unique group with specific circumstances and needs.

PGRs experience learning differently compared with those who are on taught courses. PGRs report that they do not identify with the wider student population and feel that they fall between student and staff.

In terms of mental health support, this can mean that they do not respond to institutional messages and signposting to student mental health support and can be unsure which support services they can access.

Drive an institutional culture that supports PGRs' wellbeing

Senior leaders should aim to create an institutional culture that is fully supportive of their PGRs, and that supports their wellbeing, creativity and sense of belonging.

There are many stressors in doctoral study that can impact on PGR wellbeing. These include supervisory relationships, expectations of long working hours a cultural acceptance that it should be stressful and pressure to succeed. There are many stressors in doctoral study that can impact on PGR wellbeing (Vitae 2018).

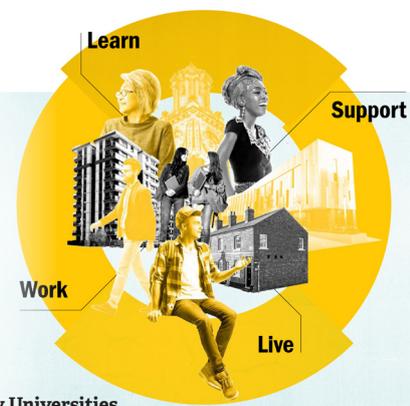
PGRs often report feelings of isolation and a sense of not belonging, and there is increasing awareness of the impact of bullying and harassment. PGRs should be fully integrated into healthy local research cultures and academic communities.

Supervisors should have the time, training and appropriate recognition for supporting their postgraduate researchers' mental health and wellbeing reflected in workload allocations, appraisals and promotions.

Provide sufficient resources to embed appropriate support and provision for PGRs

Embedding support for PGR mental health and wellbeing requires sufficient resources to achieve both the cultural change needed and appropriate targeted provision.

It is important to demonstrate high level commitment to PGR mental health so as to achieve the sustained systemic change that is required.



Mentally Healthy Universities

Collect robust ongoing data on PGRs' mental health and wellbeing

Good data on PGR mental health and wellbeing, at both institutional and UK level, is critical in establishing baselines, measuring progress and informing institutional strategies. This includes systematic collection of data on levels of PGR mental health and wellbeing; use of counselling and support services; engagement in wellbeing activities; and interruptions or failure to complete due to mental health issues.

This information needs to be shared effectively across relevant departments to drive an integrated institution-wide approach to improvement. It should be used to drive and sustain effective strategic and operational links with the NHS and other external services.

USEFUL RESOURCES

- **Universities UK Stepchange Mental Health Framework**
- **Student Minds Mental Health Charter**
- **Vitae Resources on Mental Health and Wellbeing**
- **Catalyst Project 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**
- **Exploring wellbeing and mental health, and associated support services for postgraduate researchers; Vitae**
- **Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students, Levecque et al, 2017**

Produced by Vitae in partnership with Universities UK

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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.

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