

PGR Well Bee-ing Project

Improving provision, support and resources for wellbeing and mental health issues in our PGR community



Dissemination of Findings and Recommendations



Introduction



Professor Colette Fagan,
Vice President Research,
University of Manchester

'At The University of Manchester we are committed to supporting the wellbeing and mental health for all our staff and students. We are pleased that we were one of 17 research projects, funded by the Office for Students and Research England, to improve the Higher Education sector's understanding of the wellbeing and mental health of postgraduate researchers in order to inform policy and other interventions. Our project involved extensive research with our postgraduate research community at Manchester and has made important recommendations which will be considered by our Manchester Doctoral College and communicated across the sector. We will continue to work with our postgraduate researcher community to do what we can to create an environment and workplace which is conducive to their wellbeing and mental health.'

The project had two overarching aims, firstly, to understand wellbeing and mental health issues from a PGR perspective so that we can improve the University's provision of support, resources and training for PGRs and secondly, to improve the referral pathway into the NHS for PGRs with severe mental health issues. To achieve these aims the project had seven objectives which focussed on:

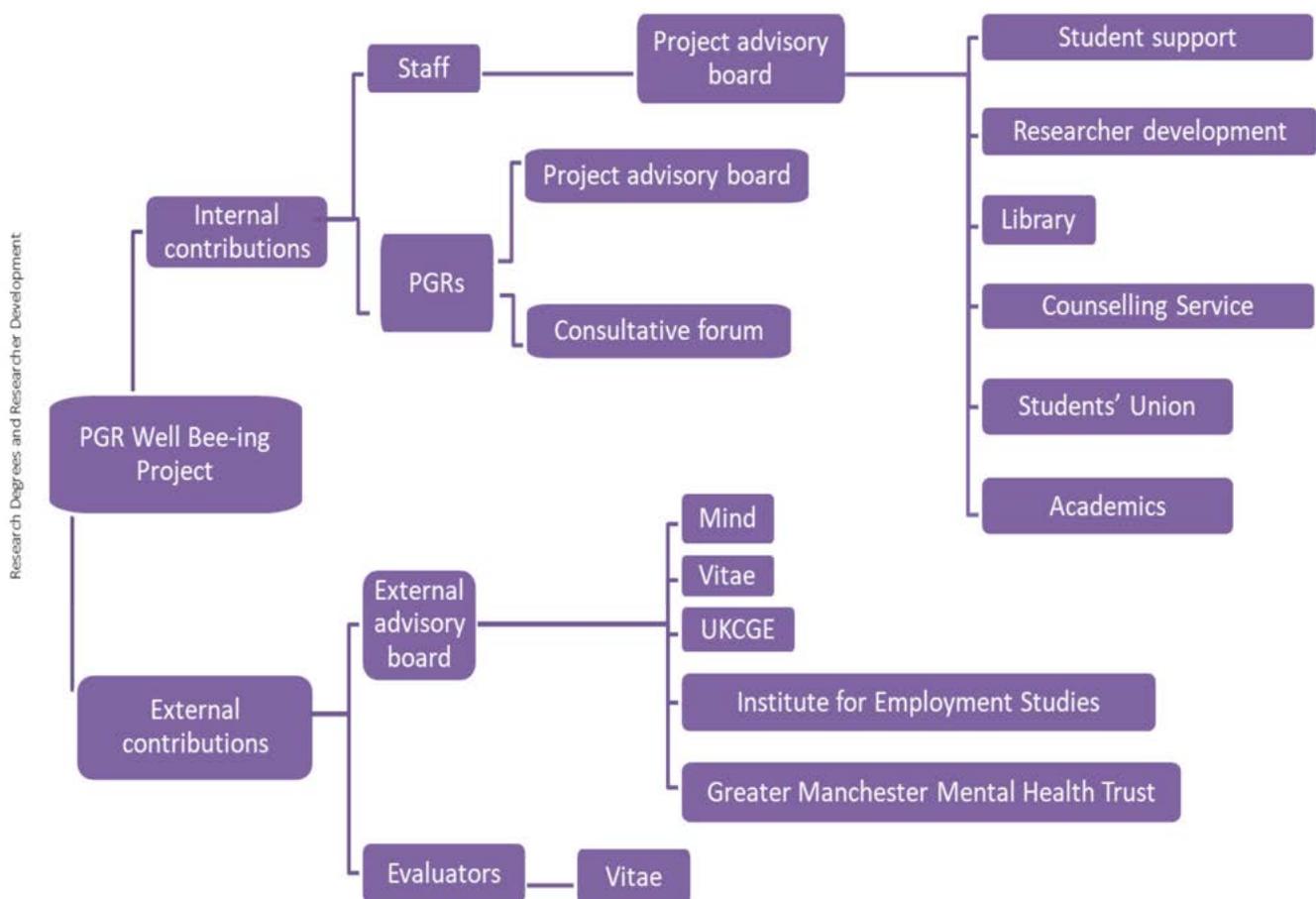


Project Overview

The project was coordinated by the Research Degrees and Researcher Development (RDRD) team and was supported by a broad range of services and colleagues, forming the project advisory board, as the image below highlights.

In addition the project benefitted from the advice and input of an External Advisory Board which included representatives from VITAE, UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE), MIND, Institute for Employment Studies and the Greater Manchester Mental Health Trust.

A consultative forum of PGRs was established, to facilitate PGR participation in the project and to act as a sounding board for the project advisory board.



Thank You

The project advisory board would like to thank all those who were involved in the project, from those who tested an app to those who joined our external board. In particular, we would like to thank the 127 members of our consultative forum who have contributed to the development of resources and ensured the project team received feedback from PGRs.



Project Launch Student's Union November 2018

Determining Prevalence

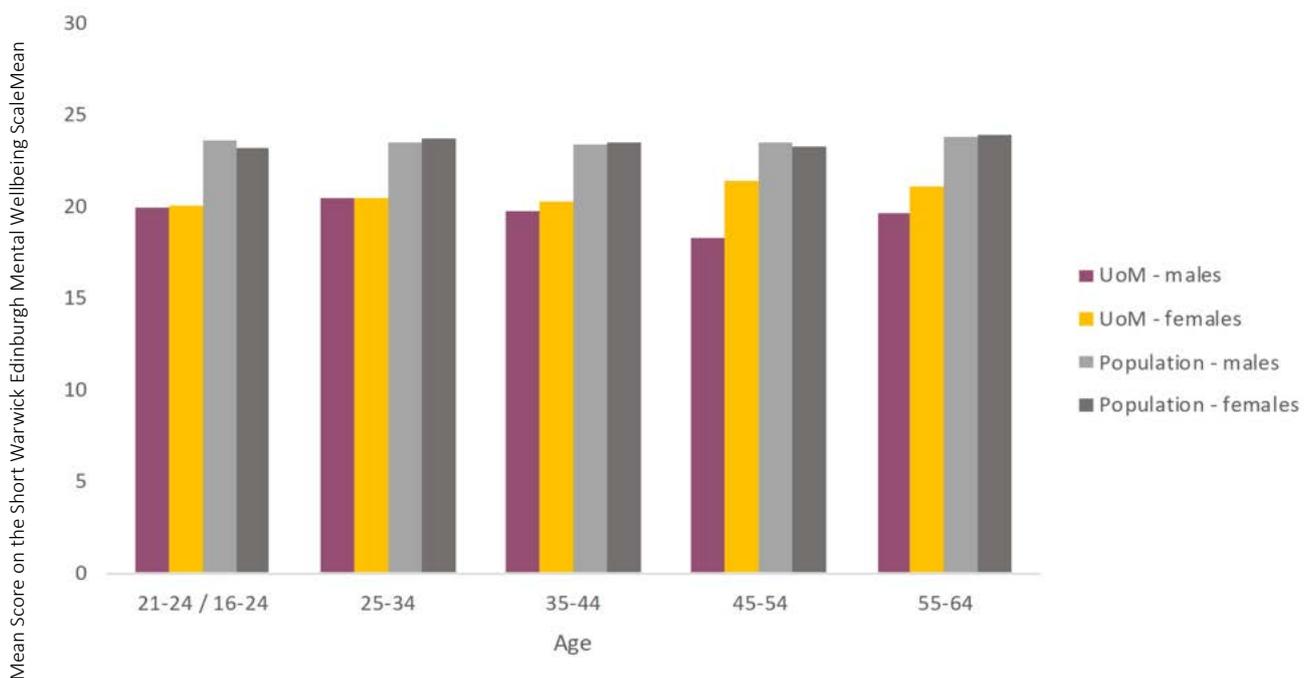
Objective: Identify the prevalence and nature of wellbeing and mental health amongst PGRs at UoM, improve our understanding of the factors that contribute to PGR wellbeing and investigate what factors predict/prevent help-seeking. Led by Dr Sarah Peters, Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Rebecca Crook, Research Assistant.

The key **activities** were:

- Cross-sectional online survey of 585 PGRs across all three Faculties to assess the nature and prevalence of PGR wellbeing and mental health.
- Qualitative investigation of PGR wellbeing from a staff perspective.
- Collation of routine data collected on PGR wellbeing and mental health: PGR interruptions and extension requests and contacts with mental health and wellbeing support services.

Key Findings: Cross-sectional Survey

Participants scored lower on a measure of wellbeing than all population-matched age groups.



Factors that had the **most negative impact on well-being** included:

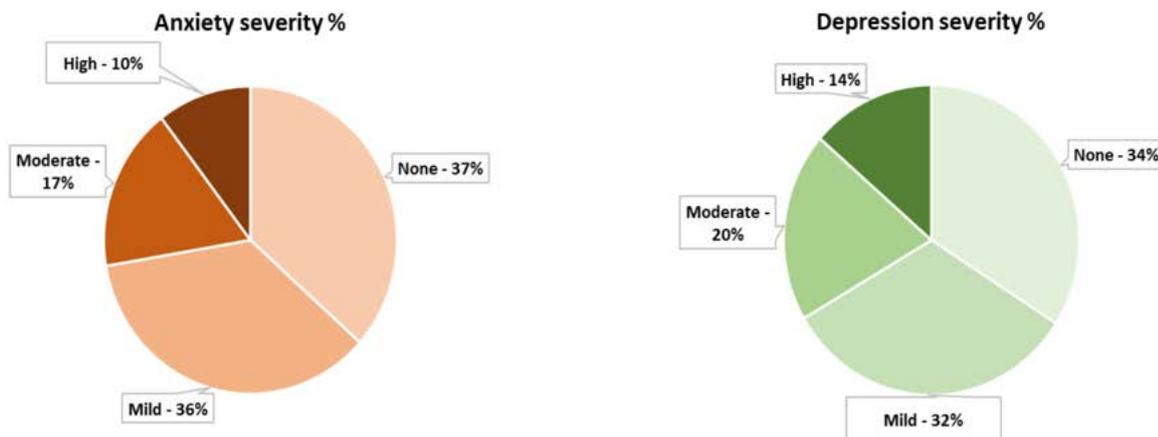
- academic challenges
- finances
- life events.

Factors that had the **most positive impact on well-being** included:

- professional relationships
- personal relationships.

Determining Prevalence

Key Findings: Cross-sectional Survey



Two thirds of PGRs surveyed experienced some degree of **depression and anxiety**, with approximately **one third** recoding **moderate-severe** levels.

More than two thirds of participants surveyed had **sought support** for issues relating to wellbeing and mental health; however **less than a fifth** had **sought support from a University service**.

Key Findings: Qualitative Investigation Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews supported the survey findings and found that four areas impacted upon PGR wellbeing: 1) negotiating a PGR identity; 2) pressures and expectations of postgraduate research; 3) complexity of the supervisory role; and 4) pinch points. Each area also created barriers to help-seeking.

Key Findings: Routine Data Analysis of routine data found that in 2018/19 a quarter of extensions and/or interruption requests were for mental health or wellbeing reasons; 27% of disclosures by PGRs to the Disability Advice and Support Service were mental health disclosures; 8.2% of Counselling Service appointments were PGRs and 71% of those presented as moderate-severe or severe on the clinical outcomes scale.

Project Recommendations:

To lower levels of anxiety, ease financial pressures and improve support for PGRs and supervisors it is recommended that Manchester Doctoral College Strategy Group and the University:

- Review the length of the PhD programmes funded by the University of Manchester.
- Review the structure of PhD programmes with a view to enhancing the existing opportunity to study part time.
- Establish mechanisms for formal recognition of research supervision in and excellence of supervision in promotion criteria and performance and development reviews.
- Develop materials to support supervisors in their role.
- Review data on interruptions and extensions for reasons relating to wellbeing and mental health along with data on the use of support and advice services on an annual basis and takes action where appropriate.
- Recognise the distinctiveness of the PGR journey in its wellbeing strategy and provision of support by central services.

Introducing a Wellbeing Check

Objective: Pilot the acceptability and value of a monthly wellbeing check for PGRs. Led by Jane Hardman, Student Wellbeing Manager, Rebecca Crook, Research Assistant and Lindsay Wilson, Project Assistant.

The key **activities** were:

A 24-item wellbeing self-reflection tool was trialled with PGRs across the University by:

- 1) frequently prompting one School in each Faculty to use the tool;
- 2) signposting one School in each Faculty to the tool only when the trial started

Focus groups were held with PGRs in the prompted and signposted Groups to explore whether the tool was suitable for use by PGRs to assess their wellbeing, and if so, whether regular prompts to use the tool were effective.

The key **findings** were:

The current iteration of the tool did not have a positive impact on PGR wellbeing.

The outcomes/actions suggested by the wellbeing tool did not reflect the PGR experience nor fit a PGR lifestyle.

The tool's purpose, a non-clinical guide to help PGRs better understand their needs and point them in the right direction for support, needs to be made clearer.

To be effective, a wellbeing check needs to be embedded into a regular review process, possibly with the academic advisor.

Project Recommendations:

To ensure wellbeing checks are effective and relevant to PGRs it is recommended that Manchester Doctoral College Strategy Group and the University:

- Develop the role of School/Department advisors to check on the wellbeing and mental health of PGRs and ensure that this role is valued and recognised in workload allocation models.
- Ensure that School and Faculty student support roles explicitly include and address the needs of PGRs and work in collaboration with School/Department PGR advisors.

Promoting PGR Engagement with Wellbeing Activities

Objective: Improve the active engagement of PGRs with Manchester's Six Ways to Wellbeing framework, tailoring it to the specific needs of PGRs by understanding why and how PGRs engage; identifying the obstacles which prevent PGR engagement as well as solutions to improve engagement. Led by Jane Hardman, Student Wellbeing Manager and Chloe Whittaker, Project Coordinator.

The key **activities** were:

Two workshops to explore if the University's Six Ways to Wellbeing are useful as a tool to support positive wellbeing in a PGR setting.

Piloting of the University's Wellbeing Champions scheme with PGRs. Three PGRs acted as wellbeing champions, hosting events and activities based on the Six Ways to Wellbeing themes of Connect and Give.

The **key findings from the workshops** were:

The Six Ways framework is useful; the barriers and solutions to using it are summarised below.

Theme	Barriers	Solutions
Time	PGRs feel unable to take breaks from work to manage their wellbeing.	Promotion of less time-intensive activities and ideas in the Six Ways framework would be helpful.
Culture	PGRs see others working long hours with no lunch breaks and feel there is an expectation to stay at their desk.	Less 'pressure from above' and 'good examples' set by supervisors could help change the culture of working without breaks. Annual leave entitlement could also be better promoted to PGRs.
Research demands	PGRs feel there is an expectation from supervisors that researchers should not be distracted from work by 'non-essential' commitments.	Supervisors should encourage engagement with activities external to research. Highlighting for example the value of volunteering to PGRs could be helpful.
Support	There is difficulty in accessing support services in situations where wellbeing should be put first e.g. sickness, bereavement or when disabled.	Support available should be better promoted to PGRs and information on processes such as interrupting studies should be clearly provided.

Promoting PGR Engagement with Wellbeing Activities

The **key findings** from the Wellbeing Champions pilot were:

PGRs are keen to attend events that encourage socialising and networking and have the aim of boosting wellbeing.

More could be done to familiarise PGRs with the Six Ways to Wellbeing to increase understanding of ways to look after wellbeing. PGRs would appreciate reminders and nudges for how to engage with the Six Ways.

When promoting the Six Ways to PGRs, smaller or less intensive ideas are needed for ease of incorporating these behaviours into PGR life.

Support needs to be made available for larger and smaller scale events and activities, which can strengthen already existing groups (e.g. research groups/offices), as well as growing larger networks (e.g. Faculty-wide).

Project Recommendations:

To ease the pressures on PGRs, ensure that resources and support meet the needs of PGRs and create opportunities for peer support and networking it is recommended that the University:

- Reviews the length of the length of the PhD programmes funded by the University of Manchester.
- Reviews the structure of PhD programmes with a view to enhancing the existing opportunity to study part-time.
- Develops a 'statement of expectations on PGR professional and career training and development' to support PGRs to complete their degree and transition to the next stage of their career.
- Provides resource for a PGR-focused student support role to coordinate activities between central student support services, maintain resources and ensures wellbeing and mental health provision is appropriate for, and communicated to, PGRs.

Wellbeing Resource Development

Objective: To identify and organise all existing wellbeing resources, and fill any gaps in provision. Led by Rebecca Crook, Research Assistant, Chloe Whittaker, Project Coordinator and Lindsay Wilson, Project Assistant.

The **key activities** were:

- Review of all wellbeing and mental health resources and workshops to identify any gaps in provision.
- Curation of existing wellbeing resources and clearer promotion of these on PGR Life.
- Focus group discussions with PGRs to better understand what resources were needed and considered useful.
- Creation of talking head videos providing a PGR perspective on the six areas of support that PGRs had identified as being needed.
- Working with PGRs and others to create new resources and meet the gaps in provision.

The key **findings** were:

Lack of understanding amongst support services about the distinctiveness of the PGR experience and how that may impact upon the wellbeing and mental health of PGRs.

Our extensive range of resources and training are not always easy to find and are not always aimed at PGRs

Supervisors understand that they have a role to play in supporting their PGRs' wellbeing but many do not know how to approach this.

New wellbeing resources developed as part of the project include:

- An online resource for support services to increase awareness and improve understanding of the distinctiveness of the PGR experience.
- An online mindfulness resource for PGRs.
- A decision tree for PGR supervisors to support them in navigating their way through the different levels and types of support for PGRs.
- An online resource for new PGRs to support them in their transition into postgraduate research.

Project Recommendations:

To support supervisors and ensure the University's wellbeing and mental health provision meets the needs of PGRs it is recommended that:

- Manchester Doctoral College Strategy Group develops materials to support supervisors in their role and promotes these via the PGR Supervisor Toolkit.
- The University recognises the distinctiveness of the PGR journey in the provision and development of resources.

Promoting Mindfulness Apps

Objective: Identifying and Promoting mindfulness apps as to their suitability for PGRs, led by Dr Warren Mansell, Reader in Clinical Psychology, Dr Sara Tai, Clinical Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology and Rebecca Crook, Research Assistant.

Activities: Focus group held to trial the usability of a series of wellbeing apps which had been developed by UoM academics.

Outcomes: The PGR-recommended apps were Pin it or Bin it, MUSE headbands and Catch It. These apps are signposted via the PGR Life site. They have also been added to a dedicated section on the Counselling Services site



PGR WELL BEE-ING PROJECT

Wellbeing apps for PGRs

The PGR Well Bee-ing Project has trialed a collection of wellbeing apps with a small cohort of PGRs at the University of Manchester.

Below are the three most popular apps and a brief description for each one.



PIN IT OR BIN IT



MUSE HEADBANDS



CATCH IT

Peer-to-Peer Support Mechanisms

Objective: Review existing provision for PGR reps and peers and establish what is needed for effective PGR support. Led by Dr Nicola Grayson, Learning Developer, and Alys Kay, Online Development Officer.

The **key activities** were:

- Two workshops with attendees from different peer support groups to inform the project team's understanding of the University's current peer-to-peer support offering and identify best practice.
- Piloting of a 'Look After Your Mate' workshop, based on the Student Minds model for PGR reps.
- Delivery of resilience and mindfulness training for PGR reps.
- Piloting of a 'wellbeing conversation group' within the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

The **key findings** were:

PGRs need more opportunities and additional support to facilitate informal networking and socialising.

PGRs valued peer-to-peer support and opportunities to engage with their peers to form a sense of community, however, current peer support provision is ad hoc.

To be effective peer support models need to be recognised, valued and supported and peer supporters need to receive training. Funding is also needed to facilitate and support events.

Resilience, mindfulness and 'look after your mate' training helped PGRs identify additional sources of support.

To encourage peer-to-peer support it is recommended that the University:

- Develops and implements a peer support model for PGRs.
- Provides PGR-dedicated resources to encourage the development of communities and networking.

NHS Referrals

Objective: Improve the University's links and pathways to local NHS providers for PGRs in need of support. Led by Sarah Littlejohn, Director of Campus Life.

This objective was met with the creation of the Greater Manchester Student Mental Health Service in 2019.

Establishment of the Greater Manchester Student Mental Health Service

- In November 2019, a unique new specialist service providing support for students including PGRs with complex health needs was established.
- The service gives students including PGRs timely access via referral to professional help for conditions including depression, psychosis, personality disorders and eating disorders.
- The aim of the service is to prevent students falling between the cracks of the University and NHS services.
- The service is a partnership between the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Salford, University of Bolton, Royal Northern College of Music and the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership.

Additional Activities:

Whilst the Student Mental Health Service was welcomed, feedback from PGRs via our consultative forum indicated that accessing student support services was at times problematic for PGRs as often staff were not aware of the PGR journey and experience and how that may impact on wellbeing and mental health.

To respond to this and in discussion with the Counselling Service, a PGR co-created resource explaining the uniqueness of the PGR experience was developed. This resource is used as a training tool for staff in services, such as student support and counselling, who interact with PGRs.

Project Recommendation:

To ensure existing services are relevant to and used by PGRs it is recommended that the University recognises the distinctiveness of the PGR journey in its wellbeing strategy and provision of support by central services.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the project, a sustainability statement, which outlines a set of actions needed to ensure that PGR wellbeing is supported by the University has been produced. The recommendations have been highlighted throughout the report and are summarised below.

- Review the length and structure of PhD programmes.
- Monitor data relating to wellbeing and mental health and taking action where needed.
- Introduce mechanisms to recognising the role of supervisors and advisors.
- Provide more training, resources and support for supervisors and advisors.
- Establish a PGR peer support model and provision of resource to encourage the development of PGR communities and networking opportunities.
- Work with existing services to ensure the distinctiveness of the PGR journey is recognised in all wellbeing and mental health provision.

Concluding Statement



Professor Melissa Westwood
Associate Vice President Research

I commend the project team and all those involved in the project for the enormous amount of work that has been undertaken during this project. The input and involvement of our postgraduate researchers has been particularly welcome and I would like to say thank you to those who gave up their time whether that be for trialling an app, joining a focus group or creating a video. I fully endorse the recommendations of the project and in my role as chair of Manchester Doctoral College Strategy Group I will work with colleagues to implement these findings.

About the Catalyst Funded Projects

In March 2018 Research England and the Office for Students awarded £1.5M to 17 projects to support the wellbeing of postgraduate researchers through the Catalyst Fund. The projects resulted in a number of resources being developed to support postgraduate researcher mental health and wellbeing. You can [read here](#) about some of the resources developed by the Catalyst funded projects.