

Enhancing the wellbeing of online doctoral researchers

Dr Kathy Chandler

UKCGE Annual Conference, University of Liverpool, 2 July 2026

Website: kathychandler.org

What is meant by wellbeing?

‘Wellbeing’ encompasses any physical, social, psychological, and emotional factors that contribute to feeling well.

Doctoral researchers in the UK

- 40% experience depression or anxiety (Milicev *et al.*, 2023). They are more at risk of poor mental health than the general population (Hazell *et al.*, 2021).
- View poor health as a ‘normal’ part of doctoral study (Hazell *et al.*, 2021).
- Only 56% of supervisors feel supported in responding to mental health and wellbeing queries from those they supervise (Gower, 2021).
- Wellbeing has far-reaching implications for the quality of UK-based research and its contribution.



WhatsApp with doctoral researchers



So, who is coming to the online seminar this morning? Just having breakfast and switching on my computer. 09:37 ✓✓

It's good to have this group for letting off steam backstage 😊 13:56 ✓✓

The document I have just shared is a comparison of the two main types of narrative research that my supervisors asked me to do. 16:03 ✓✓

I've just used your lovely infographic as an example in module material about visualisation 😊 17:58 ✓✓

Any idea as to why we might need to use NVivo? 15:15 ✓✓

A peer-led WhatsApp group had an impact on my wellbeing through providing

- a sense of connection to a community
- an outlet for sharing emotions that I could not share elsewhere.

Chandler, K. (2026) 'WhatsApp with doctoral researchers: A reflexive autoethnography', *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 17(2), p. 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-04-2024-0043>. Author's accepted manuscript.

Online doctoral researchers' wellbeing

Most research at UK universities to date e.g., Juniper et al., 2012; McCray and Joseph-Richard, 2021; Byrom et al., 2022, does not differentiate between campus-based researchers and those online.

One survey considered those who study wholly or partly off-campus (Burford et al., 2024; McChesney et al., 2024, 2025) but only 12% of participants were enrolled in an online programme.



Photo by Daniel Thomas on Unsplash

Enhancing the wellbeing of online doctoral researchers

- Supported by Joy Welch Post-Doctoral Funding.
- Anonymous 10 min survey of online doctoral researchers across UK universities.
- Participatory narrative study with co-researchers who are doctoral researchers on PhD programmes at Lancaster University.



Photo by Christin Hume on Unsplash

Questions

- Has online doctoral study impacted positively on your wellbeing? How?
- Has online doctoral study impacted negatively on your wellbeing? How?
- Who, what activities and which technologies currently support your wellbeing as a doctoral researcher?
- Are there any technologies that have a negative impact on your wellbeing?
- What could be done differently or additionally to support your wellbeing?

Some initial findings

Research website: kathychandler.org

Survey participants

193 participants from 23 UK universities

76% are female, 21% male, 3% non-binary/third gender

98% over 30 years, 70% are over 40 years, 20% over 50 years

32% live outside of the UK

94% are working, 70% full-time

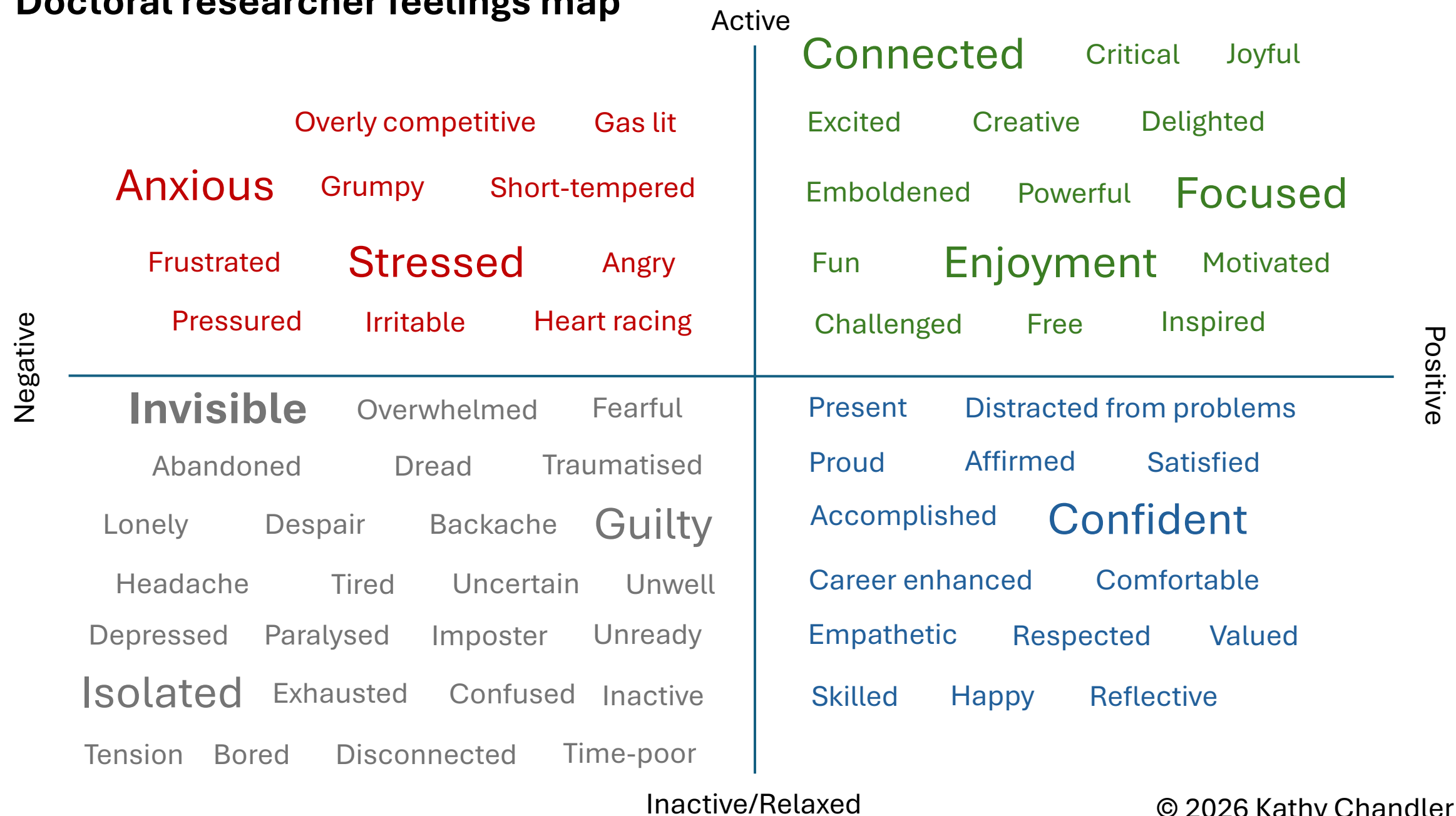
62% are parents of children or carers

88% are studying part-time

37% have been studying for 4 years or more

27% have taken a break

Doctoral researcher feelings map



Three types of experience

Resonance: where individual characteristics, learning needs and the affordances of support and online systems align perfectly (a few PGRs).

Dissonance: where learning and the progress of doctoral research are disrupted by tensions and competing demands (most PGRs).

Fracture: where breaks or absences in the support network and online systems stall or severely impede learning and progress (a few PGRs).

(Adapted from Calderwood, forthcoming)

Dissonance



Photo by Mick Haupt on Unsplash

What is different online?

- Flexibility?
- So much juggling!
- Isolation
- Connecting with peers can feel harder
- Connecting with supervisors can feel harder
- The mode of study and the dependance on technology.



Photo by charlesdeluvio on Unsplash

Fern's resilience I-poem

I was like, oh my God
I thought
I'm not going to finish this
I was thinking about giving up
I had coaching
I changed my job
I got an opportunity
I met other people
I got support around me
I have a very strong group of female friends
I had to completely prioritise it
I had to be quite selective
I just had to do it
I knew I had to really focus
I took advantage
I really dug into my support
I got through it



Alice and the Labradors

I've got two Labradors

they're at the side of me now.

they're such love bugs.

They're brilliant.

They don't get flustered or in a flap or worried about little things like we do

I think you can learn a lot from that.

I think having them having them in my office with me means

I have to take a break

I could probably fall into just sitting for hours and hours and hours

I've been sitting,

I need the toilet.

I'm still sat there like two hours later

I really need the toilet.

I haven't done anything about that.

But the dogs make you get up

they need the toilet.

I think in caring for them, it forces you to care for yourself a bit more as well, doesn't it?



Doctoral researchers can...

-
- Plan study hours and take regular breaks
 - Separate study space
 - Diary/journaling/voice memos
 - Exercise and spend time outdoors
 - Eat well
 - Regular sleep pattern
 - Time with family/friends/pets/hobbies/games/reading for pleasure/relaxing
 - Connect with peers and others who understand
 - Ask for support and use university or external wellbeing services.

Supervisors can...

-
- Be approachable, available and responsive. It's harder to get to know someone and gauge their expectations at a distance.
 - Be kind, encouraging, supportive and compassionate. Conversations, including emails, need to be warm and not rushed.
 - Take time to build relationships and ask what support PGRs have.
 - Provide timely feedback on written work that is constructive and consistent.
 - It's easier to hide wellbeing issues online. Ask about wellbeing explicitly, making it a regular item on the supervision meeting agenda. You don't have to be an expert!
 - Reach out and ask if PGRs are struggling. "I've noticed...I'm wondering..."
 - Signpost university services. Online PGRs are not always aware of them.

Supervisors should...

Treat supervision as a relational practice, checking in on the whole person and not only the progress of the project, whilst being clear about what falls within their remit and what does not. They should have training in neuroinclusive supervision and protected time to do the work well, so that care does not rest on individual goodwill. #MySupervisorIsGreat!

(Workshop participant)



Photo by LinkedIn Solutions on Unsplash

Universities can provide...

-
- Advice about the time needed for a doctorate.
 - Support with workload planning.
 - Structure and flexibility around deadlines.
 - Named, friendly administrators, not a generic mailbox or ticket system
 - Formal system to raise supervision issues and regular wellbeing check-ins with a third-party.
 - Easily navigable online platforms and tools with support.
 - Synchronous opportunities with plenty of notice that consider time zones and recordings.
 - Study breaks and tailored support on return.
 - Opportunities to connect with peers, including presenting work in progress.
 - Clear description of supervisors' role and sufficient supervision time.
 - Systems include external supervisors when they are part of a supervision team.
 - Services appropriate for online PGRs, which are better articulated.
 - Supervisor training in supporting wellbeing.
 - Opportunities for feedback (and then acting on it).

A whole university approach?

- A wide range of people and services support wellbeing, including administrators, librarians, academic development staff, online learning support.
- What if universities considered the impact of their actions at the macro level, as well as the individual and programme level?



References

Burford, J., McChesney, K., Frick, L., & Khoo, T. (2025). Conceptualising distance doctoral study after COVID-19: are we post-distance now? *Distance Education*, 46(3), 496–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2024.2388216>

Byrom, N.C. *et al.* (2022) 'Predicting stress and mental wellbeing among doctoral researchers', *Journal of Mental Health*, 31(6), pp. 783–791. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2020.1818196>.

Chandler, K. (2026) 'WhatsApp with doctoral researchers: A reflexive autoethnography', *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*, 17(2), p. 165-181. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-04-2024-0043>. [Author's accepted manuscript](#).

Gower, O. (2021) *UK Research Supervision Survey 2021 Report*. Lichfield, Staffordshire: UK Council for Graduate Education.

Hazell, C.M. *et al.* (2021) 'Nationwide assessment of the mental health of UK Doctoral Researchers', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), p. 305. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00983-8>.

Juniper, B. *et al.* (2012) 'A new approach to evaluating the well-being of PhD research students', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(5), pp. 563–576. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2011.555816>.

References (2)

McChesney, K., Burford, J., & Frick, L. (2025). Improving the experiences of doctoral students at a distance: recommendations for policy and practice. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2025.2506473>

McChesney, K., Burford, J., & Frick, L. (2024). Living the best way possible: Distance doctoral students navigating care for others and themselves. *Access: Critical Explorations of Equity in Higher Education*, 12(1) 106-128. Retrieved from <https://novaojs.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe/index.php/iswp/article/view/223>

McCray, J. and Joseph-Richard, P. (2021) 'Doctoral students' well-being in United Kingdom business schools: A survey of personal experience and support mechanisms', *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(2), p. 100490. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2021.100490>.

Milicev, J. *et al.* (2023) 'Evaluating mental health and wellbeing of postgraduate researchers: Prevalence and contributing factors', *Current Psychology*, 42(14), pp. 12267–12280. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02309-y>.

UKRI (2024) 'Statement of expectations for doctoral training'. UKRI. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/UKRI-300124-StatementExpectationsDoctoralTrainingJanuary2024.pdf>

Thank you for attending. Any questions?
