Exploring the impact of Covid-19 on PGR mental health & wellbeing: *How to support researchers in uncertain times?*

UKCGE 3rd International Conference on the Mental Health & Wellbeing of Postgraduate Researchers 2022

Dr Janet Metcalfe, Head of Vitae
Dr Rachel Handforth, Research and Evaluation Project Manager, CRAC/Vitae

Overview

- **UKRI Wave 2 survey in Spring 2021**

- **Findings reveal the mental health challenges and concerns amongst PGRs and research staff about their future careers**

- **Examined responses from PGRs (21% of respondents)**

- **Short-term impact in terms of poor mental health and wellbeing**

- **Long-term concerns about negative impacts on career prospects**

- **Evidence of racial and gender discrimination, bullying and harassment (Vitae 2021; Wellcome Trust 2020)**

What do we know about the impact of Covid-19 on PGR wellbeing?

■ **Concerns around funding/ extensions (Munro and Heath, 2021)**

■ **Dislocation from communities and peers (Wang and DeLaquil, 2020)**

■ **Less contact with supervisors (Jackman *et al.* 2021; Levine *et al.* 2021)**

■ **Disabled PGRs, parents, and part-time PGRS particularly disadvantaged (Papageorgiou, Kendall, and Puerta, 2020)**

■ **Concerns about completions and long-term impact on career, particularly for women (Bender *et al*., 2021)**

Image ref: Marco Verch on Flickr

Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
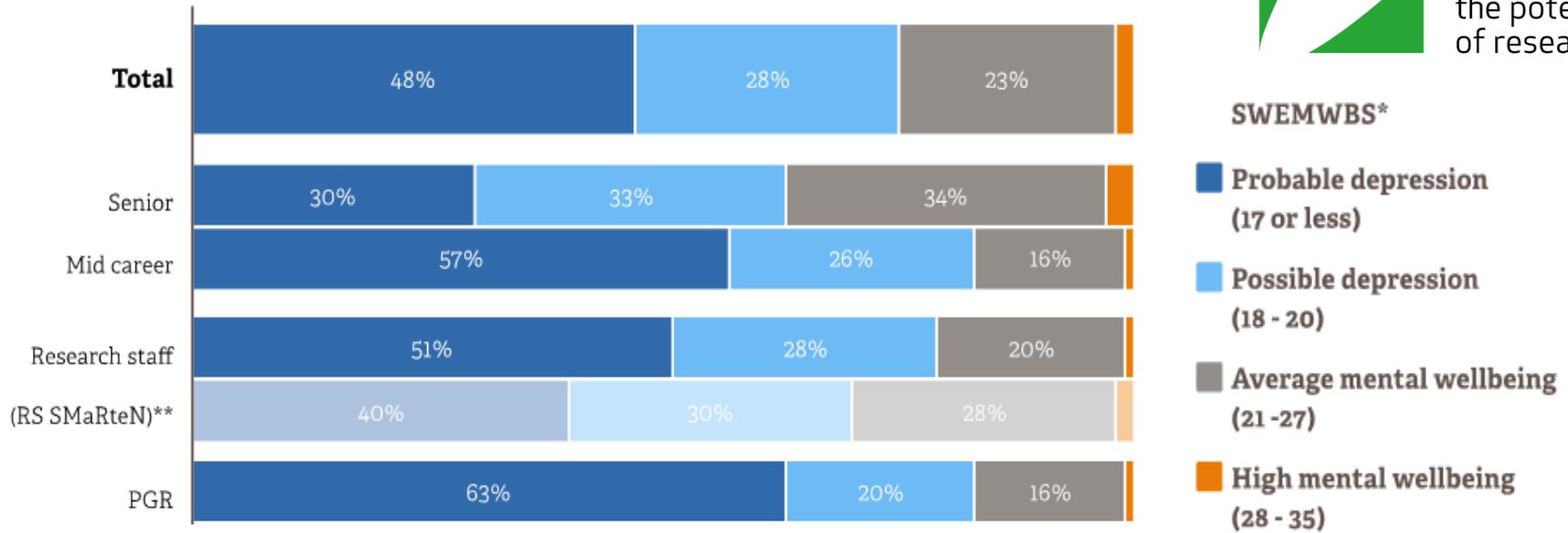
- **83% exhibited symptoms of depression, but higher amongst minority ethnic PGRs (89%) and those with caring responsibilities (85%)**

- **No real difference between those with pre-existing mental health conditions and those without**

Experiences of bullying and harassment

- **9% of PGRs had experienced bullying/harassment, with most reporting an increase since the pandemic**

- **More common for those with caring responsibilities (15%), disabled PGRs (14%) and minority ethnic PGRs (11%)**

- **Reporting is low- just 25% of those who had experienced this**

- **Though some had felt able to speak to the perpetrator about their behaviour, few sought support within their institution or research group/department**

PGRs' concerns about the future

- **77% felt consequences of Covid-19 and restrictions would negatively impact their research over the next 3 years**

- **More concerning for minority ethnic PGRs (89%) and disabled PGRs (81%), especially those with pre-existing MH conditions (85%)**

- **88% worried about the long-term impact this will have on job prospects (6% unsure, 6% not worried)**

- **Higher levels of concern amongst disabled PGRs (93%) and those with caring responsibilities (93%)**

Different experiences for those with caring responsibilities
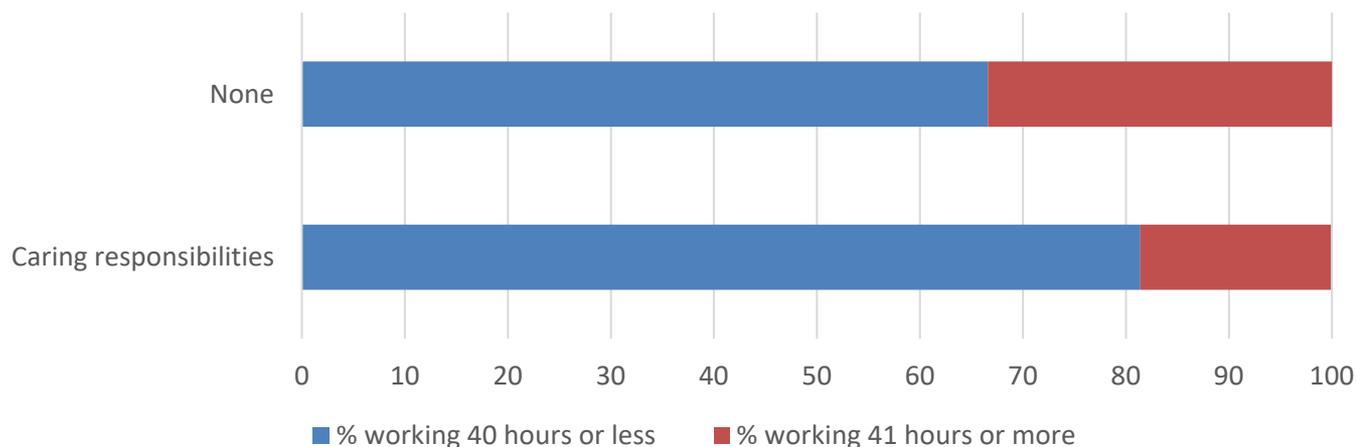
"*As a parent and a PhD student I have found the pandemic restrictions, specifically the last lockdown (Jan-March 21) extremely stressful. I think there should be more support in terms of extensions before the end of the PhD and/or more awareness for students in these groups who cannot attend work/lab and therefore lose valuable time.*"

"*It has emphasised the huge disparity in opportunities between people with or without caring responsibilities. I feel almost completely hopeless that I will be able to progress beyond my PhD in an academic career.*"

How might negative impacts be mitigated?

- **Funders?**
- **HEIs?**
- **Examiners?**
- **Current / Future employers?**

"I finish my PhD this October (2021), so I'll be looking for a postdoc. I just hope that interviewers and also viva examiners will take into account the difficulties due to Covid."

"I have had to drop one of my two projects. I will now have to apply for postdocs with a CV that just won't be very good. I am very worried I will not get a job, as I will be competing with people who finished their PhD before COVID. I don't know what to do about that, though."

"It will be helpful if Covid mitigation is considered to be ongoing for those who have Covid effects long term."

Activity: How can we collectively counter the inequities caused by the pandemic?

1. **What can practically be done to mitigate the negative impacts on PGRs in both the short and longer-term?**
   10 mins

2. **Who is responsible for taking these actions?**
   10 mins

Thank you