

Mental Health & Wellbeing of Online PGT Students: Pinch Points & Good Practice

A Timeline of Common Challenges &
Suggested Best Practice



UK Council for
**Graduate
Education**

Opening Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to the students who contributed to the co-design workshops that fed into this guidance document. We are grateful to them for sharing their time, thoughts, and experiences with us to ensure this document is as relevant and useful as possible to colleagues working in the online postgraduate taught (PGT) space.

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Julien has extensive experience teaching on fully online PGT programmes and has led sector-wide initiatives exploring the lived experiences of online postgraduate learners. His research and practice draw on collaborative, evidence-informed approaches, including co-design with students and staff, and engagement with national and international networks.

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Executive Summary

The provision of taught postgraduate programmes through online modes of delivery represents a significant opportunity to widen access to higher education. Online PGT programmes enable students who may not be able to engage in campus-based study to access and complete postgraduate qualifications. This has the potential to support capacity-building across different regions and sectors, while also contributing to more inclusive and accessible models of postgraduate education at both local and global levels. Online PGT students often balance demanding academic work with full-time employment, caring responsibilities, and other commitments. This creates sustained role conflict, time pressure, and cumulative fatigue, often exacerbated by the reduced visibility, limited informal interaction, and structural isolation present in online study. It is important to note that while most students find their programmes motivating and professionally enriching, these benefits sit alongside challenges that can impact wellbeing, engagement, and persistence. When provided with the appropriate support, these challenges can also turn into learning opportunities for students to develop their resilience and their ability to juggle different roles and competing demands.

This guidance identifies key pinch points (pre-application, programme start, term-time and assessments, dissertation, and periods of difficulty) where uncertainty, workload intensity, and limited support visibility can have the greatest impact. Across these stages, students consistently benefit from: clear and realistic communication; predictable structures; visible, proactive staff presence; thoughtfully designed opportunities for connection; and early, repeated signposting of wellbeing support. The dissertation phase requires particularly deliberate approaches, including clear supervision expectations and structured milestones. Despite the best efforts of programme teams, students completing online programmes can experience periods of difficulty. While every student and situation must be understood as unique, this document suggests strategies to identify and provide support to them. Alumni also offer valuable, experience-based reassurance that can normalise challenges and strengthen students' sense of belonging.

Overall, the document highlights the need for proactive, integrated, and context-sensitive approaches to wellbeing, embedded directly into programme design and delivery. By doing so, online PGT teams can create learning environments that are academically robust, inclusive, and responsive to the realities of students' lives.

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About this Guidance

This guidance is intended to support programme teams developing and delivering online PGT programmes in embedding mental health and wellbeing within programme design and delivery. It focuses on approaches that can be implemented through programme structure, teaching practices, and communication, rather than clinical or specialist interventions. While many institutions offer dedicated wellbeing and mental health services, the emphasis here is on what can be done within the programme itself to create conditions that better support student wellbeing.

Key Definitions

For the purposes of this guidance, mental health and wellbeing are understood in broad terms, encompassing students' ability to engage with their studies, manage competing demands, and sustain participation over time. This includes both the challenges students may experience (e.g. stress, fatigue, or isolation) and the factors that can support positive experiences, such as confidence, motivation, and a sense of belonging.

References to “staff” include academic, teaching, and professional services roles involved in programme delivery and student support. Specific roles are indicated where relevant. However, broader terminology is used to allow for application across different institutional contexts.

Using this Guidance

The guidance is designed to be applied flexibly across different programmes and institutional contexts. Not all recommendations will be feasible in every setting, and programme teams are encouraged to adapt them in line with local structures, resources, and student needs. In this sense, the document should be understood as a framework to support reflection and enhancement, rather than a prescriptive set of requirements.

To support implementation, a self-assessment tool has been produced in parallel to this guidance. This can be used to review current practice or to structure discussions within programme teams. You can access it [here](#).

How this Guidance was Developed

This guidance draws on multiple sources of evidence and practice. The project has its roots in the internal IGHI 'Student Wellbeing in IGHI Postgraduate Education' (SWIPE) initiative.

It also incorporates perspectives gathered through student and staff workshops, providing practical and context-specific insights into key challenges and support needs. These sources are complemented by relevant academic literature and sector evidence, ensuring that the guidance reflects both empirical research and current practice.

A draft of the document was reviewed by staff actively involved in the development and delivery of online PGT programmes, and by members of the CROPSNet student advisory group, who are all currently completing an online PGT programme.

Julien le Jeune d'Allegeershecque (Lead Author) has been actively teaching on online PGT programmes since 2019 and has directed CROPSNet since its inception in September 2024.

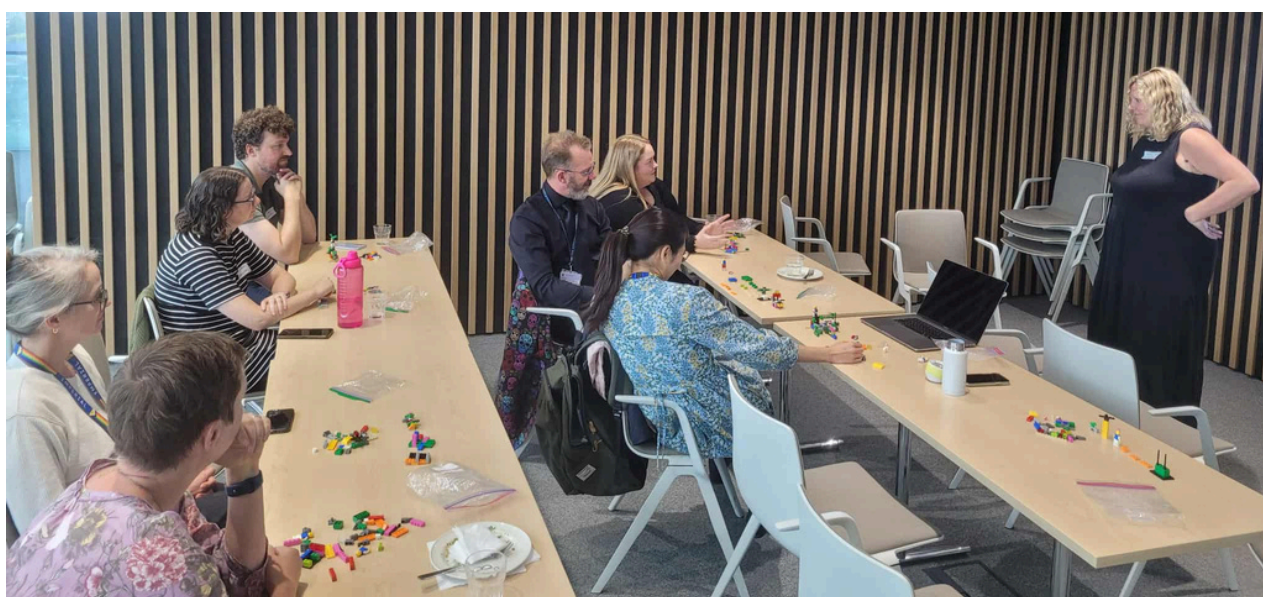
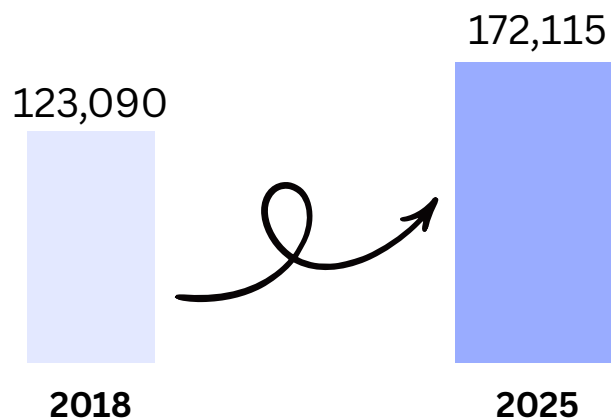


Image 1: Workshop at the CROPSNet Conference, September 2024

Background

In recent years, there has been increased recognition of the importance of **student mental health and wellbeing** within higher education. There is clear evidence that students experiencing mental health challenges are more likely to disengage from their studies (Richardson, 2015), achieve lower academic outcomes (Eisenberg, Glocberstein, & Hunt, 2009), or withdraw from their programmes altogether (Wilson *et al*, 2024). However, much of this research has focused on undergraduate and postgraduate research (PGR) students, with comparatively **limited attention given to PGT students**, particularly those **studying online** (Lister, Seale, & Douce, 2021).

This gap is increasingly difficult to justify. There are now over 150,000 students undertaking online postgraduate study in UK institutions (HESA, 2026), and this is likely to grow as demand for flexible, lifelong learning continues to expand.



Number of Online & Distance Learning PGT Students in UKHE (HESA, 2019, 2026)

Many online PGT students are **studying part-time** alongside **full-time employment, family responsibilities, and other commitments** (Kahu *et al*, 2014). As a result, their experience of higher education differs from that of traditional campus-based students. Rather than occupying a single “student” role, they are managing multiple, overlapping roles across **work, study, and personal life**.

Research suggests that this combination of roles can create **significant pressure**. The concept of role conflict is particularly useful here, describing situations where **competing demands** across different areas of life are difficult to reconcile. Online PGT students frequently report feeling stretched across these domains, managing **competing priorities** and making **ongoing trade-offs** about where to invest their **time** and **energy** (SWIPE, 2024). In practice, this often results in reduced time for rest, limited opportunities for social interaction, and a sense of persistent overload.

“[...] on weekdays Caitlin gets up between 4.30 and 5.00 am, studies for a couple of hours, commutes for 45 minutes, works for between 9 and 12 hours, commutes for another 45 minutes, and studies for a little longer in the evening, depending on what time she gets home. On Sunday afternoons, she catches up with any deadlines for that week.” - Sheail, 2018

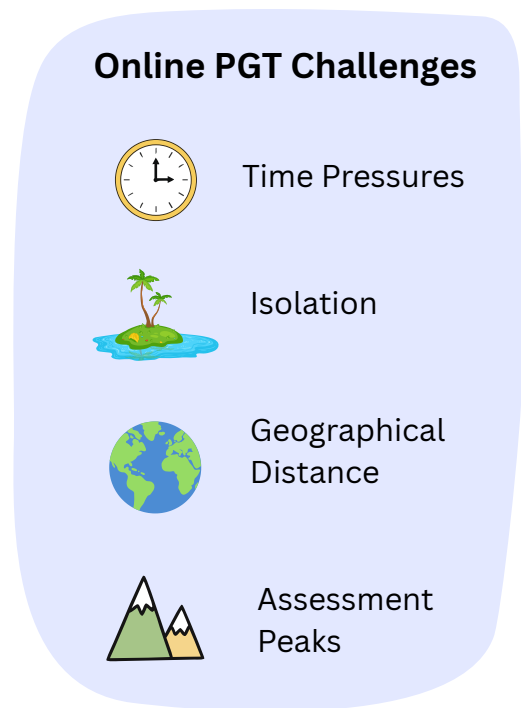
While there is considerable anecdotal evidence of role enrichment, where learning enhances professional practice and contributes positively to motivation and identity, these benefits tend to sit alongside, rather than replace, the pressures associated with balancing multiple responsibilities.

The **online context** introduces **additional challenges**. Students studying at a distance often have **fewer opportunities for informal interaction** with peers and staff, which can make it harder to develop relationships and a sense of belonging (Suleymanova, Gawanmeh, & Al-Alami, 2023).

This can be particularly pronounced for international students, who may also be navigating unfamiliar **academic norms, language differences,** and **geographical distance** from existing support networks (le Jeune d'Allegeershecque, 2025). Belonging, in this context, cannot be assumed; it needs to be intentionally designed through structured opportunities for interaction, inclusive teaching practices, and consistent, visible support from staff.

Institutional evidence suggests that these pressures can have a **cumulative effect over time**. While many students begin their programmes feeling positive about their mental wellbeing, this tends to decline as they progress, with workload pressures, time management challenges, and difficulties maintaining a balance between study and other commitments emerging as key contributing factors (SWIPE, 2024). Students frequently describe feeling **fatigued, stressed,** and at times **overwhelmed,** particularly when **assessment demands** coincide with periods of high pressure in their professional or personal lives.

At the same time, there are structural features of online programmes that can make it more difficult to identify and respond to these challenges. Students may have **limited visibility to staff,** reducing opportunities for informal check-ins or early identification of difficulties. Awareness and use of support services can also be uneven, even where these are available, and students may be **less likely to seek help** unless prompted (Lister, Seale, & Douce, 2021).



From conversations with alumni and online PGT practitioners, it appears that staff-student contact, particularly in relation to wellbeing, is often more limited than students would find helpful, with many reporting a **lack of regular check-ins** or proactive support.

Despite these challenges, there is growing evidence that **programme design** and **delivery** can make a meaningful difference (Shi et al, 2025). Clear and early communication, predictable course structures, and opportunities for interaction can help reduce uncertainty and support students in managing their time more effectively. Equally, **visible** and **approachable staff**, alongside **well-signposted support**, can make it easier for students to seek help when needed (Walsh et al, 2024). Flexibility is also important, particularly in recognising the “**temporal tension**” between fixed academic requirements and the fragmented time available to students balancing multiple commitments (Sheail, 2018). However, flexibility needs to be carefully designed, so that it supports students without introducing additional ambiguity or inconsistency.



It is also important to recognise that student wellbeing in this context is not solely defined by negative experiences. Many online PGT students report **positive aspects of their studies**, including a sense of purpose, enthusiasm for learning, and the perceived value of their programme for future career development (University of Edinburgh, 2024, 2025). These positive and negative experiences often coexist, reinforcing the need to take a more holistic view of wellbeing that goes beyond measures of satisfaction or distress alone.

Taken together, this evidence highlights the need for approaches to mental health and wellbeing that are **sensitive** to the **specific context of online PGT study**. Models of support developed for campus-based or full-time students may not translate directly to this setting. Instead, there is a need to move towards more **proactive** and **integrated approaches**, where wellbeing is considered as part of programme design and delivery, rather than something addressed separately through support services alone.

This guidance document builds on these insights by identifying key “pinch points” across the online PGT student journey, alongside practical strategies that can be implemented at each stage. The aim is to support programme teams in developing approaches that are not only academically robust, but also sustainable and responsive to the realities of students’ lives.

A Theoretical Lens

The pinch points identified in this guidance can be understood through established theories of adult and non-traditional learning, which help explain both why particular challenges arise in online PGT study and why certain pedagogical and structural responses are effective. Online PGT students are predominantly adult learners balancing study alongside professional and personal responsibilities.

From an andragogical perspective, adult learners are motivated by relevance, autonomy, and purposeful learning, but are particularly sensitive to unclear expectations, misalignment between effort and outcomes, and unnecessary cognitive load (Bergin *et al*, 2023; Kahu *et al.*, 2014). Self-determination theory further highlights the importance of supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core psychological needs underpinning motivation and wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Other relevant theories include Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Peters & Romero, 2019), Networked Learning (Jones, 2009), and Cognitivism (Hendricks, 2019).

Many of the pinch points described in this document (e.g. workload overload, assessment uncertainty, fluctuating engagement, and feelings of isolation) can be understood as moments where one or more of these needs are undermined. The suggested good practices that follow are therefore not framed as discrete wellbeing interventions, but as pedagogical and programme-level approaches that enable students to engage more sustainably with their studies and reduce avoidable pressure points across the online PGT journey.

Notes on the Evidence Base

While references are provided where available, the evidence base relating specifically to mental health and wellbeing in online PGT contexts, across both published and grey literature, remains limited. This guidance should therefore be read as both practice-informed and exploratory, and as a prompt for further research and evaluation to deepen understanding in this area.

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I. Pre-Application to Programme Start

a) Pre-Application & Application

The pre-application and application stages are critical in shaping students' expectations, decision-making, and early perceptions of the programme.

Many of the challenges that emerge later, particularly around workload, isolation, and work–study–life balance, have their origins here.

This stage therefore represents an important opportunity to support informed decision-making, set realistic expectations, and establish a foundation of trust and belonging.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
1. Managing Expectations & Informed Decision-Making	<p>Limited understanding of workload intensity and time commitment, and the reality of balancing study with full-time work and personal life.</p> <p>Misalignment between student expectations and programme demands.</p> <p>Underestimating the emotional and cognitive load of online study.</p> <p>Decisions driven primarily by career aspirations, with less consideration of wellbeing implications.</p>	<p>Provide transparent, detailed pre-application information, including expected weekly study hours, and assessment patterns and peak workload periods.</p> <p>Use realistic student narratives or case examples (e.g. combining work, study, and family life) and clearly communicate the demands of online learning, not just its flexibility.</p> <p>Encourage applicants to reflect on readiness and capacity, not just eligibility.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>2. Anticipating Role Conflict (Work-Study-Life Balance)</p>	<p>Applicants may not fully anticipate the intensity of juggling multiple roles and the likelihood of the need to sacrifice, particularly in personal time and rest.</p> <p>Lack of structured support to help applicants assess how study will fit into existing commitments.</p> <p>Over-optimistic assumptions about available time and flexibility.</p>	<p>Frame programme information around real-life constraints, including content such as “What a typical week looks like” and likely periods of peak demand (e.g. assessments, dissertation).</p> <p>Provide guidance on time management expectations and strategies for negotiating workload with employers or family.</p> <p>Signpost the concept of “temporal tension” (competing time demands) early, so students can plan accordingly.</p> <p>Signpost core materials in marketing information to provide easy to access directory (e.g. pre-course reading list).</p>
<p>3. Clarity, Consistency, and Accessibility of Information</p>	<p>Programme and application information is often fragmented across multiple sources, and is overly complex or inconsistent.</p> <p>Applicants struggle to identify key timelines, expectations, and available support.</p> <p>This can contribute to early anxiety and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Provide a single, coherent source of “truth” for applicants (e.g. programme webpage or guide).</p> <p>Ensure information includes clear timelines, FAQs, and visual summaries of the student journey.</p> <p>Repeat key information in different formats to support understanding.</p> <p>Ensure clarity around assessment structure, time commitment, and modes of engagement (live vs asynchronous),</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>4. Decision Pressure & Application Experience</p>	<p>Increased anxiety associated with committing to a significant time and financial investment and uncertainty about whether the programme is the “right choice”.</p> <p>Administrative burden of application systems, documentation, and deadlines.</p> <p>Additional complexity for international applicants or those returning to study after a break.</p> <p>At this stage, abstract concerns become more immediate and personal, which can create early stress and uncertainty.</p>	<p>Provide clear, step-by-step guidance through the application process.</p> <p>Make sure pre-requisites are clearly stated in marketing materials.</p> <p>Ensure communications are consistent, concise, and easy to navigate.</p> <p>Offer opportunities to ask questions (e.g. Q&A sessions, contact points).</p> <p>Avoid overly promotional messaging - prioritise clarity and realism.</p>
<p>5. Early Signals of Institutional Culture & Support</p>	<p>Limited or inconsistent communication may lead to fears that the programme is impersonal or transactional and that support may be limited or difficult to access.</p> <p>Early interactions shape students’ expectations of support and their willingness to seek help later on in their studies.</p>	<p>Use warm, timely, and accessible communication throughout the application process.</p> <p>Ensure applicants have clear points of contact who are responsive and that there are opportunities for interaction with staff (and where possible, students).</p> <p>Use a tone that reflects approachability, responsiveness, and a supportive ethos.</p> <p>If relevant, highlight any “difficult knowledge” that might be included in course curricula.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>6. Belonging, Inclusion, and Student Identity</p>	<p>Students can anticipate isolation in online study and a lack of peer connection.</p> <p>For international and diverse cohorts, students also have the potential to face cultural uncertainty, concerns about language, communication styles, and expectations. Students can also question “is this programme designed for someone like me?”</p> <p>Distance can be experienced not only geographically, but also socially and culturally, contributing to early anxiety.</p>	<p>Use inclusive and diverse examples of student experiences.</p> <p>Provide early opportunities for informal connection (e.g. pre-course sessions, online spaces where appropriate) and clearly communicate how interaction, collaboration, and peer support are built into the programme.</p> <p>Reinforce that different backgrounds and study patterns are anticipated and supported.</p> <p>Demonstrate awareness and acceptance of the value of diversity (cultural, neurodiversity, disability, gender and sexual identity...).</p>
<p>7. Visibility of Wellbeing and Support</p>	<p>Wellbeing is often not explicitly addressed at this stage. Communications and informational content often fail to highlight support services available and how support works in an online context. This can give the impression that mental health is addressed only when problems arise.</p> <p>Awareness and use of support services is often limited later in the programme, indicating the importance of early visibility.</p>	<p>Make wellbeing visible from the outset, including clear messaging that it is a programme priority.</p> <p>From pre-induction through to induction and beyond, introduce support services and how they can be accessed.</p> <p>Outline key roles (e.g. Personal Tutors, programme teams) in programme information and during induction.</p> <p>Frame support as ongoing and proactive, not only reactive.</p>

b) Programme Start (Weeks 0-4)

The first 4 weeks of an online PGT programme are a period of adjustment, where students are establishing how study fits into their lives in practice. During this time, early experiences of workload, interaction, and support can shape longer-term patterns of engagement and wellbeing.

Effective practice at this stage focuses on reducing uncertainty, building confidence, and creating connection. Clear structure, early interaction, and visible, proactive support can help students move from initial uncertainty to a more stable and sustainable approach to their studies.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
1. Transition to Study & Academic Confidence	<p>Struggles adjusting to online learning environments and platforms, and new academic expectations and standards</p> <p>Potential lack of confidence, particularly for students returning to study after a break and international students navigating unfamiliar norms.</p> <p>Uncertainty about “Am I doing this right?” and expectations around participation and performance.</p>	<p>Provide clear, repeated guidance on academic expectations, participation norms, and assessment requirements.</p> <p>Offer early skills-based support, such as academic writing, research methods, and digital learning tools.</p> <p>Use low-stakes or formative activities to build confidence and to allow students to test understanding without pressure.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>2. Establishing Belonging and Connection</p>	<p>Limited early interaction with peers.</p> <p>Student reluctance to engage in live sessions and discussion forums, which can be the result of cultural and communication differences affecting participation.</p> <p>Potential feelings of isolation, particularly in fully online environments</p> <p>Without early encouragement, students may remain peripheral participants, which can impact both engagement and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Design early opportunities for structured interaction, including small group activities, breakout discussions, and introductions and experience-sharing.</p> <p>Create low-pressure spaces for engagement, such as non-graded forums and informal discussion channels.</p> <p>Encourage inclusive participation by offering multiple ways to contribute (spoken, written, asynchronous).</p> <p>Be explicit about how community and peer interaction are supported. Encourage students to set-up their own channels to interact (e.g. WhatsApp).</p>

In Practice - MA Fine Art (Online), Falmouth University

On the MA in Fine Art (Online) at Falmouth University, the programme team recognised that, regardless of provision within the institutional VLE, students will often establish their own peer-led spaces (e.g. WhatsApp, Discord).

Rather than discouraging this, the programme provides early guidance on setting up independent platforms safely and inclusively. Students are supported in considering platform choice, accessibility, and potential risks, alongside guidance on ethical communication, data protection, and safeguarding.

This includes clear “dos and don’ts”, such as not sharing peers’ identities or coursework publicly without consent, and knowing when to leave a space and seek university support. Clear staff boundaries are also set, helping students build community with confidence while reducing risk and digital overwhelm.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>3. Navigating Workload & Time Management</p>	<p>Realisation of the actual workload and time commitment.</p> <p>Difficulty establishing study routines and sustainable patterns of engagement.</p> <p>Early signs of overload from competing demands across work, study, and personal life.</p> <p>Students may begin to experience time pressure and fragmentation, particularly when study is fitted around other responsibilities.</p>	<p>Provide clear guidance on weekly expectations (“what to do this week”) and estimated time required for different activities.</p> <p>Use predictable structures, such as structure of units/learning block and consistent deadlines.</p> <p>Support students in time planning and prioritisation, while reinforcing that adjusting routines takes time and that early difficulty is normal.</p>
<p>4. Clarity, Structure, and Cognitive Load</p>	<p>Challenges from navigating: Multiple platforms and systems, and complex or inconsistent module structures.</p> <p>Information overload in early weeks, with difficulty identifying “what is essential” vs “optional”, and what to prioritise.</p>	<p>Ensure consistent and intuitive module design, including clear navigation and standardised structure across learning blocks.</p> <p>Make sure to provide “Start here” guidance and clear signposting of key tasks and priorities.</p> <p>Avoid unnecessary complexity or duplication, and use repetition and multiple formats to reinforce key information.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>5. Normalising Wellbeing and Help-Seeking</p>	<p>Students may not prioritise their own wellbeing and show reluctance to seek support early.</p> <p>Wellbeing may not yet be perceived as relevant or as something students can get support for. This can be compounded by a lack of awareness of available support services.</p> <p>If not addressed early, students may only engage with support at crisis points, rather than proactively.</p>	<p>Programme teams should aim to embed wellbeing messaging within teaching sessions and, where appropriate, course materials.</p> <p>Programme culture should normalise the challenges of transition and that feelings of uncertainty or feeling overwhelmed are common.</p> <p>Support services should be signposted clearly and early, and programme communications should reinforce that seeking support is expected and encouraged.</p>
<p>6. Early Staff Contact & Support Visibility</p>	<p>Students can struggle due to limited or delayed interaction with Personal Tutors and teaching staff, as well as uncertainty about who to contact and how to seek help.</p> <p>Depending on their background and prior academic experiences, students can also experience hesitancy in raising concerns, particularly around wellbeing.</p>	<p>Establish early and visible staff presence, including introductions from key staff and clear communication channels.</p> <p>Schedule proactive check-ins in the first weeks.</p> <p>Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of staff members (e.g. Personal Tutor support), and how and when to seek help. This includes administrators and digital education teams (if relevant).</p> <p>Use a warm, approachable tone in all communications.</p>

II. During the Programme

a) Term-Time & Around Assessments

During term time, and particularly around assessments, the primary challenge for online PGT students is sustaining engagement and wellbeing under conditions of ongoing pressure. Workload, time constraints, and competing responsibilities converge, often resulting in fatigue, reduced engagement, and increased stress.

Effective practice at this stage focuses on managing intensity, maintaining clarity, and sustaining connection. Coordinated assessment design, clear communication, and visible, responsive support can help mitigate pressure and enable students to engage more sustainably with their studies.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
1. Workload, Overload, and Cumulative Pressure	<p>Students can struggle with increased workload intensity, particularly around assignment deadlines and group work.</p> <p>On programmes with multiple concurrent modules, clustering of deadlines can create peak periods of pressure.</p> <p>Struggles from the early days of the programme around balancing study, work, and personal responsibilities can persist. These issues can be compounded by the accumulation of fatigue over time.</p>	<p>Review and coordinate assessment scheduling to avoid unnecessary clustering. Ensure students have enough time to review and implement formative feedback into their summative assignments.</p> <p>Provide clear guidance on the expected workload for each task, and the relative weighting and priorities of different assessments.</p> <p>Where possible, programme teams should look to stagger deadlines and allow flexibility in submission timelines.</p> <p>To help with time management, workload expectations should be explicit and consistent across modules.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>2. Time Pressure and Role Conflict</p>	<p>Sustained role conflict, where competing demands across different areas of life are difficult to reconcile, can lead to stress and fatigue.</p> <p>This is the result of persistent tension between academic deadlines, professional responsibilities, and personal commitments on the one hand, and reduced time for rest, social interaction, and non-academic activities on the other.</p> <p>To manage these pressures, students can resort to making ongoing trade-offs, often at the expense of wellbeing.</p>	<p>Programmes teams should acknowledge these pressures explicitly in teaching sessions and programme communications.</p> <p>Programme design should allow for flexibility where possible, including asynchronous learning options and access to recordings. Provision of different formats (e.g. lecture notes alongside videos) should be made available to suit different learning preferences.</p> <p>Guidance should be provided on managing competing priorities and how to plan around peak workload periods.</p> <p>Ensure policies (e.g. extensions and mitigating circumstances) are clear, accessible, and consistently applied.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>3. Feedback, Communication, and Support</p>	<p>Students have highlighted the importance of timely, clear communication, particularly during high-pressure periods.</p> <p>Delays or lack of clarity in feedback or responses to queries can create anxiety and hamper active engagement of students with learning materials and assessment opportunities.</p> <p>Limited communication and feedback that is not perceived as useful can lead to the perception that there is no ongoing dialogue between the students and the programme teaching team, and that support is not readily accessible.</p>	<p>Provide timely and constructive feedback that supports improvement and reduces uncertainty. Clear expectations should also be maintained around response times to queries and mandated turnaround time for marking. This applies to both students and staff.</p> <p>Programmes should offer regular opportunities for interaction (e.g. office hours, drop-ins) and ensure that communication channels are clear, accessible, and actively monitored.</p> <p>To ensure high quality feedback, rigorous marking QA procedures should be followed, and teaching staff should be encouraged to undertake assessment & feedback training.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>4. Assessment Anxiety and Uncertainty</p>	<p>Assessment periods can act as acute stress points, particularly where expectations are unclear or feedback is limited.</p> <p>Anxiety around performance and grading, as well as meeting expectations of the teaching team.</p> <p>Students can feel uncertain about the assessment criteria and what is considered “good” work.</p> <p>Additional assessment-related stress can be linked to group work dynamics and a lack of clarity around assignment requirements and submission processes.</p>	<p>Provide clear and transparent assessment guidance, including on criteria and marking expectations. Where appropriate, make examples of previous work available to students.</p> <p>Students should be offered opportunities to ask questions about assessments, via drop-ins or recorded Q&As for example.</p> <p>Providing formative assessments is a great way to build confidence, answer any questions, and clarify expectations.</p> <p>From a programme delivery perspective, ensure consistency in assessment design and feedback approaches.</p>

In Practice - MSc Health Policy, Imperial College London

As part of one of the modules, students are assigned a group report which consists of three parts. As a formative assessment, groups are asked to prepare a 10-minute presentation which covers the key background and contextual information relevant to their final group report. This presentation is delivered during the Week 4 Live Session, allowing students to receive feedback from their peers and from the module teaching team.

Students then have a further four weeks to complete their group report, including two weeks with no taught content to allow them to focus on the assessment. The design of the formative assessment ensures that students have already completed Part 1 (Background & Context) of their summative assessment. This also allows for any issues related to group dynamics to be flagged at an early stage. Finally, the feedback on the introductory section of the report allows for any issues with the chosen topic, or any other potential changes or improvements, to be identified and suggested before the final report is submitted.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>5. Sustaining Wellbeing and Preventing Burnout</p>	<p>Students may continue to progress academically while experiencing declining wellbeing, particularly if support is not accessed early. This can be the result of accumulated stress and fatigue.</p> <p>These issues can lead to reduced capacity for students to engage and maintain motivation in their studies.</p> <p>There is also a risk of burnout, particularly in prolonged periods of high demand. Evidence suggests that student use of support services is limited in these situations, despite increasing need.</p>	<p>Wellbeing should be embedded into ongoing teaching and communications.</p> <p>The programme delivery and design should normalise periods of difficulty and the need to seek support, alongside reinforcing awareness of available support services.</p> <p>Staff should encourage students to engage with peer support and connection, as well as the other informal and formal supports available to them.</p> <p>It is a good idea to include light-touch wellbeing check-ins during key points in the term (e.g. start of a module, start of 2nd year of study if on a multi-year programme...).</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>6. Engagement, Motivation, and “Surface Participation”</p>	<p>Students may remain enrolled and progressing, but with reduced depth of engagement, which can impact both learning and wellbeing.</p> <p>Reduced engagement due to time pressure and/or fatigue.</p> <p>Student participation can shift towards completing minimum requirements and “Tick-box” participation.</p> <p>Decreased motivation for active engagement can be noticed, particularly during sustained periods of high workload.</p>	<p>Design learning activities that are clearly relevant to professional practice and meaningful, rather than purely procedural.</p> <p>Avoid unnecessary or duplicative tasks that increase workload without clear value.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for reflection and application to real-world contexts.</p> <p>If appropriate, set clear expectations around student contributions (e.g. minimum word count for a forum post, or time indications for activity completion).</p> <p>Maintain regular and visible teaching presence in order to sustain engagement and reinforce connection.</p>

b) Dissertation & Supervision

The dissertation phase represents a distinct stage within the online PGT journey. It is typically characterised by increased independence, reduced structure, and a shift from taught content to self-directed work. While this can be a rewarding period, it also introduces specific risks to mental health and wellbeing, particularly where expectations, support, and communication are not clearly established.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
1. Transition to Independent Study	<p>The structure of a dissertation module represents a sudden shift from structured, taught modules to self-directed, open-ended work. This can lead to uncertainty about how to scope and manage a research project and what “good progress” looks like.</p> <p>The loss of regular teaching contact and peer interaction can also lead to difficulty maintaining momentum without this external structure.</p>	<p>Provide clear guidance at the outset on the dissertation process, stages, and expectations.</p> <p>Students should develop an understanding of what constitutes manageable scope and realistic outcomes, and the timeframes associated with these.</p> <p>Breaking the dissertation into defined milestones (e.g. proposal, draft sections, final submission) can help students plan and track their progress. Maintaining some level of programme-level structure (e.g. key dates, check-ins) can further help here.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>2. Supervision, Communication, and Expectations</p>	<p>Given the centrality of supervision at this stage, lack of clarity or inconsistency can significantly impact both progress and wellbeing.</p> <p>Students have reported unclear expectations regarding the frequency and format of supervision, the respective responsibilities of the supervisor and the student, and inconsistent or limited contact with supervisors.</p> <p>Similarly to support-seeking behaviours, students can also be hesitant in initiating contact or raising concerns relating to their dissertation or their supervisor.</p>	<p>Through programme information and communications, establish clear supervision agreements, including the expected frequency of meetings, communication channels to be used and expected response time, and the appropriate scope of feedback and support made available.</p> <p>Student and supervisors should be encouraged to engage in early discussions around their expectations and working styles.</p> <p>Programme teams should ensure proactive contact between students and supervisors, rather than relying solely on student initiation.</p> <p>It is also essential that students know who to contact if supervision issues arise, and that any concerns they may have in this context will be taken seriously.</p>
<p>3. Isolation and Loss of Peer Connection</p>	<p>The shift to self-directed learning can lead to heightened isolation, particularly in fully online programmes where informal contact is already limited.</p> <p>This can occur due to reduced opportunities for peer interaction and shared learning experiences, as well as limited opportunities to benchmark progress and share challenges.</p>	<p>Programmes should create opportunities for peer connection during the dissertation phase, such as through writing groups, peer feedback sessions, and informal discussion spaces.</p> <p>Dissertation leads should also encourage cohort-level interaction where possible, and reinforce that challenges at this stage are common and are not unique to individual students.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>4. Motivation, Momentum, and Emotional Wellbeing</p>	<p>Students may experience fluctuating motivation and confidence, particularly when progress is slow or unclear.</p> <p>Students often experience difficulty sustaining motivation over an extended period, especially without a structure to rely on. This can lead to periods of low productivity and self-doubt or loss of confidence.</p> <p>These feelings can be heightened by the increased pressures of the dissertation linked to the high-stakes, final assessment nature of the project, and accumulated fatigue from earlier stages of the programme.</p>	<p>Emphasise process over perfection, particularly in early stages.</p> <p>Support students in setting realistic goals and timelines, and reassuring students that processes and support is available to them, even if they fall behind.</p> <p>Recognise incremental progress and encourage supervisors to provide constructive, confidence-building feedback.</p> <p>Staff should normalise that periods of difficulty and slower progress are not uncommon and can be overcome.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>5. Managing Scope, Expectations, and Completion Pressure</p>	<p>Students, particularly those with less extensive academic expertise, may not know what constitutes an appropriate project or research project at Master’s level, leading to anxiety. This can also impact decision-making along the research and writing-up process.</p> <p>There are understandable pressures linked to the final completion (and finishing the programme). Any remaining uncertainties around assessment criteria and submission processes are amplified during this period.</p>	<p>Provide guidance on defining and refining research questions, and how to maintain a realistic and achievable scope.</p> <p>If possible, offer a research methods course before the dissertation year that starts building research methods skills and allows students to start considering/planning their dissertation project.</p> <p>Supervision should support decision-making and prevent overextension and scope-creep.</p> <p>Programme information and communications should ensure clarity around assessment criteria and Masters’ level expectations, as well as provide reassurance that a well-executed, focused project is preferable to an overly ambitious one.</p>

In Practice - *Evidence from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Miller et al (2026)*

In their 2026 article, "Accessibility and flexibility: master's level academic mentorship and research supervision at distance", Miller and colleagues offer practical information on how to deliver effective supervision for Masters' dissertation students in online contexts.

Programme teams should prioritise providing consistent and relational supervision. Regularly scheduled supervisory meetings, alongside clear expectations about communication and turnaround times, help students sustain momentum and reinforce their identity as developing researchers.

To address the risk of isolation common in online thesis work, the programme encourages peer connection through writing groups, online research seminars, and informal virtual spaces where students can share progress and challenges. Supervisors also draw selectively on cross-disciplinary perspectives, inviting input from colleagues in related fields where this can enrich students' thinking without diluting subject expertise.

The programme makes deliberate use of the flexibility of online supervision, using virtual meetings to improve accessibility and maintain continuity of contact. Throughout, supervisors prioritise supportive relationships and cultural awareness, recognising that students' expectations of supervision, communication styles, and help-seeking behaviours may vary across cultural and professional contexts.

Reference

Miller, S., Thomas, Y., Davies, L., Baddock, S., Papuni, H., and Richards, N. 2026. "Accessibility and flexibility: master's level academic mentorship and research supervision at distance". *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 1-14.

III. Supporting Students in Difficulty

Crisis points and challenging periods are an inevitable part of some students' experience, particularly in the context of balancing study with complex personal and professional lives. In online PGT programmes, these moments can be harder to detect and respond to, making proactive systems and clear processes essential.

Effective practice focuses on early identification, clear pathways to support, and compassionate, consistent responses. By creating an environment where students feel able to seek help, and where staff are equipped to respond appropriately, programmes can better support students through periods of acute difficulty while maintaining their engagement and progression.

Institutions and senior leadership need to ensure that clearly defined escalation pathways are in place for students on online PGT programmes. Staff members who may interact with students requiring professional support need to be made aware of these. Encouraging staff to undertake training which provides them with skills in identifying and delivering mental health support (e.g. Mental Health First Aider courses in the UK) can increase staff confidence in responding to students in distress.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>1. Student Help-Seeking and Barriers to Support</p>	<p>Evidence suggests that even where services exist, awareness and engagement can be limited, particularly in online contexts.</p> <p>Students may be reluctant to seek help due to stigma around mental health, perception that support is not relevant or accessible to them as online students, and an uncertainty about who to contact.</p>	<p>Ensure clear and repeated signposting of support services, and reinforce that seeking support is expected and appropriate, and that support is available to online students.</p> <p>Multiple routes for accessing support should be provided, including via academic staff, Personal Tutors, and dedicated support services.</p> <p>Consistent tone and messaging can help reduce stigma and normalise help-seeking behaviour.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>2. Identification and Visibility of Crisis Episodes</p>	<p>Due to the specificities of online PGT education, crisis points may only become visible once they have escalated.</p> <p>This is due to the limited visibility of students in online environments, and the lack of informal interactions where concerns might otherwise emerge.</p> <p>Ability to identify students in need of support can be made harder through silent disengagement (e.g. missed deadlines, lack of participation), and the reluctance of students to disclose difficulties.</p> <p>Staff may also feel uncertain about how to recognise signs of distress and when to intervene.</p>	<p>Programme teams should monitor engagement indicators, such as sudden drops in participation, missed submissions, and/or lack of communication.</p> <p>Staff should ensure that changes in engagement are followed up in a supportive way.</p> <p>Institutions need to provide staff with guidance on recognising potential signs of distress, and create clear internal processes for escalating concerns where appropriate.</p>

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>3. Timeliness and Accessibility of Support</p>	<p>Students have reported that while support services can be helpful, delays and accessibility issues can reduce their effectiveness.</p> <p>Barriers identified to effective and timely help-seeking behaviours include time zone differences, work commitments, and the focus of support information and services on on-campus and face-to-face delivery methods.</p> <p>There are also sometimes issues around the legality and feasibility of offering mental health support to students not residing in the institution's home country.</p>	<p>This is the most challenging aspect of supporting mental health and wellbeing for online PGT students.</p> <p>Programme teams should work with institutional services to provide international and online PGT students with accurate information on the formal support options available to them.</p> <p>If there are gaps identified in the support available and a crisis occurs, programme staff should aim to identify local support options to signpost to the student.</p>

In Practice - *Masters in Public Health (Online), Imperial College London*

The Programme Team delivering the MPH (Online) at Imperial College work with Wilfred House, a charity which provides therapy and other forms of mental health support, to ensure that MPH (Online) students can access support services in times of acute need.

Working with a partner, rather than relying on existing institutional services and NHS Mental Health support services, overcomes the legal complexities of non-UK residents not being entitled to access UK-based support services.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
<p>4. Follow-Up and Reintegration</p>	<p>After a crisis, students may struggle to re-engage with study or may feel disconnected from peers or the programme. This can be especially true when students interrupt their studies.</p> <p>A lack of follow-up support once immediate issues are addressed can lead to a risk of longer-term disengagement or withdrawal, and can have a negative impact on the student’s learning experience.</p>	<p>Provide structured follow-up, including check-ins after periods of absence or difficulty, and proactive communications with students ahead of them re-entering the programme.</p> <p>Programme teams should support students in re-engaging with learning and catching up on missed work.</p> <p>If possible, a gradual reintegration is encouraged, rather than immediate full return.</p> <p>A supportive and non-judgemental approach should be followed.</p>
<p>5. Staff Response and Boundaries</p>	<p>While staff are often a first point of contact, their role is typically to provide initial support and signposting, rather than specialist intervention.</p> <p>Staff may feel uncertain about their role in supporting student mental health, especially for students in need of acute support, and underprepared to respond to disclosures. Worries about making things worse are also common.</p> <p>From the point of view of the student, there is a risk of staff overstepping professional boundaries, and of being provided inconsistent or unclear support.</p>	<p>Programme staff should be encouraged to receive training on responding to disclosures and maintaining appropriate boundaries.</p> <p>The role of staff on online PGT programmes is mainly to listen and respond with empathy, and to signpost to appropriate services.</p> <p>At a programme level, senior staff should develop clear guidance on when and how to escalate concerns, and ensure that there is a consistent response across the programme.</p>

IV. The Benefits of Alumni Support

Alumni represent a valuable but often underutilised source of support within online PGT programmes. Having successfully navigated the same challenges, they can offer insight, reassurance, and a sense of perspective that is distinct from staff-led support. Their involvement can contribute positively to both student experience and wellbeing, particularly at key transition or pressure points.

Alumni can play an important role in normalising challenges, reinforcing belonging, and providing credible reassurance. Their perspectives can help bridge the gap between expectation and experience, supporting students to navigate the programme with greater confidence and a clearer sense of what is achievable.

Theme	Pinch Points	Suggested Good Practice
1. Peer Insight, Reassurance, and Realism	<p>Current students may feel uncertain about what lies ahead (e.g. assessments, dissertation), and experience a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed. Due to isolation, students can also perceive challenges as unique to their own experience.</p> <p>Unless purposefully addressed, there are limited opportunities for students to access honest, experience-based perspectives on their programme of study, or to gain practical insights from those who have completed the programme.</p>	<p>Create opportunities for alumni engagement, such as guest talks or Q&A sessions.</p> <p>Include panel discussions at key stages of the programme and invite alumni to share realistic accounts of managing workload and expectations, as well as to offer practical advice and reassurance.</p> <p>Alumni perspectives can be built into induction and pre-dissertation stages to offer experience-based and relevant perspectives.</p> <p>Where possible, programmes should support informal mentoring or peer-to-peer connections.</p>

In Practice - *MSc Biodiversity, Wildlife and Ecosystem Health (Online), University of Edinburgh*

The MSc in Biodiversity, Wildlife, and Ecosystem Health at the University of Edinburgh is a great example of how alumni can be effectively integrated into an online PGT programme.

Moving beyond the traditional ad-hoc guest talks, alumni are actively involved as paid tutors, guest speakers, and co-creators of curriculum, including the development of new electives that address emerging gaps in professional practice.

Alumni also contribute to live sessions, discussion boards, career insights, and peer mentoring, bringing current, real-world expertise into the learning environment. These activities are reciprocal: alumni report professional development, continued learning, and a strong sense of belonging, while students value the credibility, reassurance, and practical insight alumni provide.

Alumni engagement is further sustained through alumni-led events and networks, reinforcing community and lifelong learning beyond graduation.

Summary - Top 5 Priority Actions

The guidance set out in this document is intended to support programme teams in embedding mental health and wellbeing within the design and delivery of online PGT provision. Not all recommendations will be feasible in every context; however, the following five actions represent areas likely to have the greatest impact and can be prioritised across programmes.

1. Set clear and realistic expectations from the outset.

Provide transparent information about workload, time commitment, and the realities of balancing study with other responsibilities. Where possible, use concrete examples to support informed decision-making and reduce the risk of early overload.

2. Design for structure, clarity, and consistency.

Ensure that modules are clearly organised, with predictable weekly patterns, consistent deadlines, and explicit guidance on what is expected. Reducing ambiguity can help minimise cognitive load and support students in managing their time more effectively.

3. Build connection and belonging intentionally.

Create structured opportunities for interaction with peers and staff throughout the programme. Community should not be assumed to develop organically in online environments; it needs to be actively designed and supported.

4. Make support visible, proactive, and easy to access.

Clearly signpost available support and embed regular opportunities for check-in. Encourage early help-seeking and position support as a normal part of the learning process, rather than something accessed only at points of crisis.

5. Coordinate workload and assessment to manage pressure.

Review assessment patterns across modules to avoid unnecessary clustering of deadlines. Where possible, ensure that expectations are realistic, aligned across the programme, and allow for an appropriate degree of flexibility (e.g. in deadline or submission format).

This guidance is intended to support programme teams in taking a proactive, practical approach to embedding mental health and wellbeing within online postgraduate taught provision. While contexts will vary, the principles outlined here are designed to be adapted and applied in ways that are appropriate to local needs, aims, and constraints.

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About CROPSNet

The Collaborative Research for Online Postgraduate Studies Network (CROPSNet) brings together researchers and practitioners with an interest in online postgraduate education, with a focus on sharing evidence, practice, and innovation.

You can find out more on our [website](#), and sign-up to become a member [here](#).

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Further Information & Contact

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